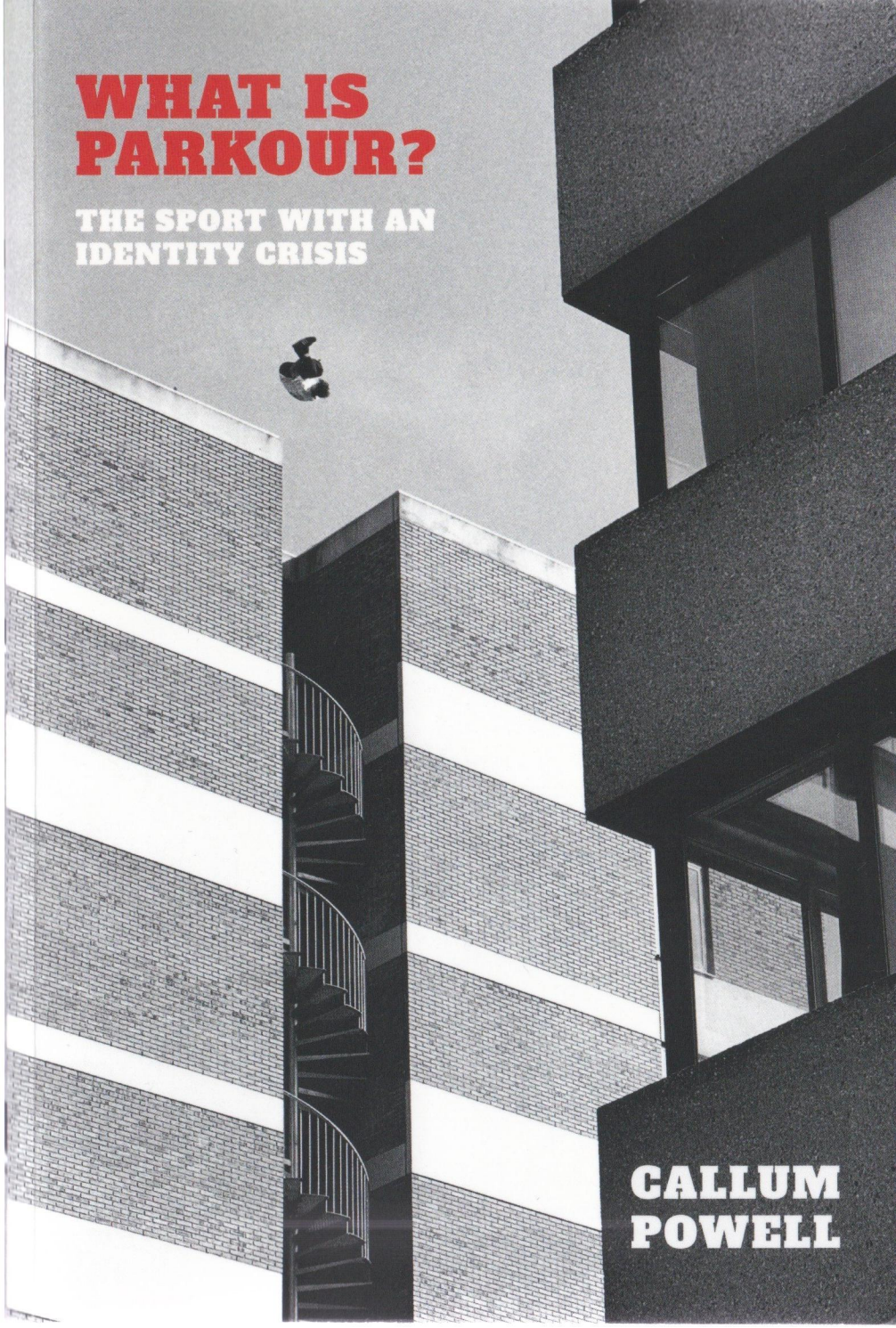
WHAT IS PARKOUR?

THE SPORT WITH AN IDENTITY CRISIS



CALLUM POWELL

WHAT IS PARKOUR?

THE SPORT WITH AN IDENTITY CRISIS

CALLUM POWELL

CONTENTS

PART ONE

Chapter 1 - Introduction....8
- Pourquoi?....9
- Enter the Bureaucrasphere....15
- Confused Custodians....18
- Impetus....21
- This is for Us....17

Chapter 2 - The Finer Details....23
- The Contrarian Pseudonymous Disciples of Old....23
- Traceur (Confusion + Obfuscation = More Confusion)....26
- Assisting Equipment....32
- Gloves & Shoes....36
- Safety Equipment....38
- Crash Mats & False Milestones....40
- Grey Trophies....43

Chapter 3 - A to B, or not A to B....48
- Rage Froobling....48
- Parkour, Literally....50
- Parkour, Imaginatively (Just don't go upside down)....52

Chapter 4 - The Sport That Borrows....54
- Urban Ballet....54
- Climbing....55
- Martial Art....59
- Wheel-based Middlemen....62
- Gymnastics....64
- Malleability....66

Chapter 5 - Late to the Party....68
- To Exercise Naked....68
- Codified Dead-ends....69

Chapter 6 - Parkour's Origins....73
- Lisses & Évry....73
- Jeunes de Banlieue....77
- Idiot Box Influence....78

- La Méthode Naturelle....80
- Raymond Belle....83
- The Other Elder....87

Chapter 7 - Fame & Rifts....90
- Odd Jobs to Oddballs....90
- The Split....92
- Parcours to Parkour....93
- The Guard's Faults....94
- Yamakasi vs Les Traceurs (ADD vs Parkour)....96
- The World at Boiling Point....102

Chapter 8 - Freerunning: A Fork in the Road....105
- Jump London....105
- Retrofitted Distinction....108
- The Purist's Flip-Blocking Glasses....109
- Hate-Tinted Glasses....112

Chapter 9 - The Dilution of the Copycats....114
- The Early Arms Race....114
- A Feed from the Predecessors....115
- Blane The Meticulous....116
- Chondromalacia....118

Chapter 10 - The Slow Convergence....121
- PhilyDee....121
- Joy Breaks the Barrier....123
- Ilabaca....124
- Russia & Eastern Europe (Out of Time)....126
- The Dust Settles....129
- Untangling the Identity Crisis....132

Chapter 11 - Word Games....136
- Words are Alive....136
- Parkour Language Barrier....139
- Kong vs Catpass....141
- Defining Complex Things....146

Chapter 12 - Redefining Parkour....148
- Movement & Move....150
- Body....150
- Environment....151
- Happy, Happiness & Fun....164

- Freedom....164
- Exploring....167
- Running, Jumping and Climbing....167
- Obstacles....168
- Mental & Fear....170
- Physical....173
- Creativity....178
- Expression....182
- A to B & Efficient....183
- Improve, Limits & Overcoming....188
- Challenges....189
- Art & Style....190
- The Moment of Truth....193

PART TWO

Chapter 13 - Parkour Industry....196
- Callow Anticapitalists & Opportunistic Outliers....196
- Corporate Giants vs Our Grassroots....206
- Stepping on our Achilles Heel....212
- Financial Independence vs Corporate Acquisitions....214
- Sell Outs....220

Chapter 14 - Competition....224
- Pro Parkour, Against Competition....224
- Early Competitions Sucked....226
- The Birth of Speed Comps....228
- Red Bull's Short-lived Infatuation....230
- The Rise of Grassroots Comps....233
- Novel Formats....234
- Actual Activism....237
- The Good....238
- The Bad & The Ugly....241
- It Has its Purposes....250

Chapter 15 - FIG....253
- The Backstory....253
- Youth Appeal....260
- Fight Fire with... Letters....262

- Risks of Involvement....266
- The Floodgates Open....271
Chapter 16 - The Takeover in Full Swing....282
- The Anomalous Effects of Sportisation....282
- The Divide Grows....297
- An Iron Fist In A Velvet Glove....309
- Fire with Fire....315
- The Future....319
Chapter 17 - Parkour, The Meme....323
- The Attention Olympics....323
- Human Billboards....325
- Neek Pandering....327
- Vertigo-Prone Muggle Pandering: GOHSSHWA....331
- The Social Media Scientists: Puppets of the algorithm....339
- The Funnelling of Culture....344
- Survival of the Loudest....350
- What is Lost?....351

PART THREE

Chapter 18 - What Does Parkour?....354
- Effort is Relative....356
- Effort is... Effort....358
- The Value of Doing (The Why)....361
- The Slipperiness of Parkour Philosophy....366
Chapter 19 - Parkour Philosophy....370
- Antifragile....370
- Challenge-Positivity....373
- EXP Accumulation (Neophilia)....379
- Know Thyself, Grow Thyself....382
- Expectation vs Reality....385
- We Start Together, We Finish Together....391
- Summing Up the Blah Blah....396
- Meaning Making (Telos)....397
Chapter 20 - Divergent Telos....402
- A Hard Pill for the Reward Driven Fly-by-night Temps....403
- The Parkour Midlife Crisis....404

- Passion-Fuelled Volunteers (Autotelic Zeal)....406
- Spreading Value....410
Chapter 21 - Parkour is for Everyone....415
- Danger!....415
- Comparison is the Thief of Joy....424
- Parkour Femenino....431
- Post-peak PK (AKA Nap club)....447
- Still Able....453
- Rooster & The Unsaleables....455
Chapter 22 - Salience....460
- Ambiguity....460
- Accessibility vs Cool....463
- Telling Stories....464
- 2 Kewl 4 Skool....468
- At the Core of it All....471
Chapter 23 - In Closing: It's Nothing....472
- Figma Morphogenesis....472
- Childlike....475
- Play & The Birth of Exercise....477
- The Birth of the Playground....482
- The Death of the Playground....484
- The Base....486

PART ONE

Chapter 1 - Introduction

What is parkour? In conversation with outsiders, we commonly hear thoroughly thought-out summations to the tune of, "The thing where blokes jump off buildings and stuff." Or, more recently, some have likely come to know it as the oddity on social media that's increasingly becoming a meme—another niche fad that young men are milking to amass an online following that the average Instagram user can't seem to erase from their perfectly curated algorithm of rage bait, brain rot and fatal car accidents. Or even worse, it's simply known as *that thing from The Office*. Even in the best cases, the public's view of what parkour is has always been hazy. But, at the same time, its own practitioners' conception of what they do is equally as hazy, as when asked, rather than a concise definition, you will more often be subjected to a rambling ear-bashing of near-incoherent fluff. There are many factors to blame for this, but for now, let's draw our attention to good ol' faithful Wikipedia for some clarity:

> "Parkour is a training discipline where practitioners (called traceurs) aim to get from one point to another in a complex environment, without assisting equipment and in the fastest and most efficient way possible."

I would guess most of you reading this would agree that this is not only too simple a definition for a practice with far more depth than simply getting somewhere quickly, but it's also a highly inaccurate way to describe how most of us practice and perform today. Or, in the past, for that matter, even going back as far as the original French founders in the early 1990s. This definition was practically outdated as soon as it was written. Yes, fast and efficient movement from one point to another is a feature of what we do, and a handful of practitioners have been inclined to focus on that aspect at times throughout parkour's history. But to put what we do in such a narrowly confined box is not only erroneous, but just plain lazy.

Look, I know that Wikipedia is but one website, and one that allows members of the public to edit articles. As someone who was somewhat of a veteran of Wikipedia graffiti in my youth, I am well aware of this fact. However, wherever you tend to look, other definitions will parrot the same. As a result, you will hear this lazy definition in most news reports and articles on parkour. AI large language models like ChatGPT and Google's terrible AI Overview will spit out the same. We need to break this down and start again from the ground up.

Pourquoi?

Some may claim, "Parkour doesn't need a new definition. Even if it was correct at any point, it doesn't necessarily mean it needs to be changed now that it has expanded into something drastically different. This definition existing doesn't affect the way anyone trains."

It's true that barely anyone practising these days is boxed in by this claustrophobic definition. As a community, we bounce ideas off each other and evolve freely rather than subscribing to something that seems so benignly ineffectual as a definition. But I have some thoughts on why updating it may be a good idea.

Many in our community wish to see more interest and participation in parkour worldwide. The more people who are involved in parkour, the better our industry will thrive. If our industry is thriving, so will those who have worked for many years to make parkour their profession, whether as a performer, content creator, clothing brand owner, competitor, coach, gym owner, or event organiser. Ultimately, those who deserve to make money by spreading value through parkour will find it easier to sustain their passion and lifestyle. This would be great because, right now, parkour is far from a thriving industry. It's rare that anyone is earning enough for a stable living without working a second job on the side, despite years of effort. Unfortunately, our industry isn't quite large enough to effectively support many of its professionals without piggybacking upon more

prominent non-parkour brands and corporations. Alternatively, one could veer off on the long journey into the stunt industry, usually leaving parkour behind entirely.

Another, arguably more significant, reason for wanting to see increased interest and participation is that many of us who have found something valuable in parkour want others to experience it too. Without delving too deep into the weeds on what value parkour can bring to the lives of individuals, you'd probably agree that it sure would be a better world if, at the very least, fewer people spent the majority of their waking hours semi-comatose under the spell of a screen. And especially so if their social media algorithm provides an endless vertical conveyor belt of rage bait, brain rot and fatal car accidents.

I have to agree with Canadian parkour veteran René Scavington, who said in an article called *Parkour Specifically*, "If you want to get more people doing parkour, you better damn well be able to quickly and efficiently explain to them exactly what it is!"

In an activity widely defined by quickness and efficiency, we certainly lack the quickness and efficiency of explanation. Similarly, Mark Toorock of American Parkour has said, "I have taken some heavy hits over the years for suggesting that 'we' get one definition. Frankly, I don't see why anyone would want to learn a discipline that nobody can define."

Parkour is such a visual sport, and for years, we have relied on letting the movement speak for itself. Rather than going through the painstaking effort of explaining it, many of us tend to let our favourite video summarise the general essence of parkour for someone. It is so diverse, with numerous off-shooting branches, that it's practically impossible to represent the entire picture in just one video. The practice is simply too broad. The chances are, whoever you're showing your favourite example to will only get insight into your favourite flavour of parkour. Imagine showing someone pizza for the first time and only serving them Margherita—or even worse, Hawaiian.

Several factors are making this seemingly simple task of explanation increasingly challenging.

For any parent desperately wanting to pry their sedentary kid out of their gaming chair to engage in something more active and meaningful than watching videos of people reacting to Minecraft reaction videos, or playing Fortnite and yelling slurs into their gaming headset to strangers online, parkour might seem like a trendy, new and immersive activity that their kid can relate to.

Big corporations are lurking on the periphery, looking to associate their brands with a hip, cool urban lifestyle sport like ours. Parkour might just fit the bill.

I invite you to buckle up and imagine you're in the shoes of either the parent or the savvy corporate advertisement campaign manager doing a bit of research to see if parkour is a viable option, only to fall headlong into a bottomless cesspool of confusing bullshit.

There are videos of Mormons flipping about dressed as Pikachu and oversharing their newborn baby online. Countless other videos of grown men doing tepid soft-play gym flips dressed in every popular fictional character costume you can imagine. There are videos cheaply exploiting tame altercations with police and security guards, usually in privileged countries where you run no real risk of any consequence doing so. Various injurious fail compilations. Videos of Dominic Di Tommaso, along with his own extensive back-catalogue of fail compilations. A subreddit bursting with vitriolic spats over what constitutes either parkour or freerunning, mostly being waged by people with Ezio Auditore from Assassin's Creed as their display picture. A video titled *Bold Guy vs Parkour Girl*, where from the intro you think you're about to either watch a cheesy 80s porno or a distasteful PSA on the perils of domestic violence, but instead, it's merely the world's worst parkour chase video, preceded by the world's worst acting and dialogue. A documentary on an English socially inept gamer hanging one-handed from the arm of a crane. Videos of high but small roof gaps executed with an unnatural air form, with the glaringly apparent intention of pandering to the vertigo-stricken public. There is a whole series of videos of Brits escaping from pits.

Teenagers are dressed as skateboarders, bobbing about and bouncing between walls in a pinball-machine-like manner. They could see countless cheap prank videos featuring a roid-head Russian, often

flipping around members of the public (even though most of the time, it's clear that it's his girlfriend with awful acting skills). They could stumble upon videos of groups of people in brightly coloured, clown-like baggy trousers crawling up and down staircases. Videos of a sweaty and worryingly pale vampire-esque man haunting the rooftops of Paris, with a stripe-patterned beard, wearing a fake monkey tail out of the back of his XXXL tracksuit bottoms. There are videos of events with people playing tag on a small square stage, where in one, after a blonde contestant gets caught, he exits the stage crying and punches a wall in a hissy fit. A video of one of the sport's most-followed representatives doing a flip from a world-famous pornstar's world-famous butt before she suggestively proceeds to give one of her world-famous blowjobs. Videos of competitions where supposed future Olympians are zig-zagging on a crummily designed stage, cartwheeling and roly-pollying between different bars and platforms to execute the best of their predictable acrobatic repertoire. And to top it all off, there is an alarmingly overwhelming abundance of Minecraft parkour videos!

Yes, this is what we look like. This brief window into our bubble must be puzzling to any intrigued parent or corporate bigwig. With nowhere else to turn, faithful Wikipedia is there to provide some well-needed clarity. Only for them to read:

> "Parkour is a training discipline where practitioners (called traceurs) aim to get from one point to another in a complex environment, without assisting equipment and in the fastest and most efficient way possible."

Any sane and rational person who has spent no more than ten minutes researching parkour can tell you this is not descriptive of the bewildering barrage of content they have witnessed. Despite parkour's ongoing evolution, I am left wondering why the dominant definition has remained unchanged and unchallenged for so long. Considering that the public's perception of our vast parkour bubble is vital for many reasons, it might be a good move to get our act together. And I'm not merely talking about the definition. That's but

the tip of the iceberg. I also mean the colossally lofty, multi-storey, towering heap of unresolved issues we are sitting upon as a culture and community. All these things contribute to our culture-wide identity crisis.

We often refer to the *parkour community,* but what does that even mean? The parkour community is far from being a single, homogeneous monolith. There are various sub-communities and bubbles with vastly different values, opinions, intentions, and preferences about how to practice parkour and everything else surrounding it. There are often significant differences between country to country, city to city, friend group to friend group and gym to gym within the same cities.

In the *Myrm* documentary titled *WHAT HAPPENED*, Colorado's Dylan Baker says, "Everywhere you go, you are gonna find different mentalities about why you train, what parkour is about, what you should do with it, where it should go professionally. The more I've travelled, the more I've seen how differently we all see it. It's almost like we're doing different sports sometimes. It's that different."

Please don't misunderstand me—I'm not at all railing against the diversity of parkour. Its diversity is something I find profoundly valuable, as it means something can be found in it for everyone, making it more accessible to a broader demographic. However, I can't help but think that our general disorganisation, disagreements, and community-wide muddled disarray are clipping our wings as a young subculture and emerging industry. And over time, if we fail to agree on some unifying themes and common ground, things may compound into a bigger issue that poses a threat to what makes what we do so special and unique.

Enter The Bureaucrasphere

As a newer, less established activity, there are many instances where not having our shit together comes at a disadvantage. A relatively recent and ongoing debacle is hard to dismiss as one of them. That

was when we were dragged kicking and screaming into the harsh, cutthroat world of sports bureaucracy.

In 2017, the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (International Gymnastics Federation, AKA FIG) began encroaching on parkour's sovereignty and assumed institutional authority as the sport's sole international governing body. This was a transparent and desperate attempt to save the sinking ship that is gymnastics by scooping up a budding, naive and disorganised sport that is much trendier in the general public's eye than their rigidly traditional, stale, sanitised, corrupt and punitive shit-heap of a sport that hardly anyone wants to participate in without being forced by their parents.

FIG had its sights set on including parkour in the Olympic programme as a sub-discipline of gymnastics. Early on, regardless of whether we believed our inclusion in the Olympics would be good or bad, most of us agreed it would be a kick in the teeth if it were gymnastics rather than us at the wheel, especially as parkour is something wholly separate. This financially driven misappropriation and hostile takeover were only bolstered by FIG's acquisition of two obedient lapdog poster boys who happen to be two of parkour's original French founders: David Belle, widely heralded as the chief originator, and Charles Perrière, another of the founders who barely anyone knows or cares about. FIG must have assumed that paying off these two figures, who had for a long time remained entirely disinterested in the parkour community, would be more than enough to get full backing from the international community… It didn't.

When the news broke, most of us were up in arms. Beyond the Olympics, we risked our industry's sovereignty because of FIG's deep-rooted institutional power as a global governing body. If they wished, they could regulate how we coach and compete, how indoor and outdoor facilities are designed and built, and influence the activity's perception among the public and government officials. This would create a forced monopoly, undermining two decades of work by our community leaders and grassroots companies in establishing and legitimising our practice and cultivating its identity. The fact that they viewed us as so small, insignificant and blissfully unorganised that they thought they could shoehorn themselves in and essentially

bulldoze over our years of progress and swallow our sport in its entirety was, in short, a bit of a piss-take.

But to be fair, we were far from organised, and even less so unified. We lacked an international federation to represent the global community's interests and defend against looming threats like this. From FIG's perspective, we must have looked like the new sport on the block, made up of happy-go-lucky street rat misfits, that was ripe for the plucking.

Confused Custodians

Only afterwards, with the onset of panic, did a few busybodies from the outskirts of our global community scramble together to create an organisation named *Parkour Earth*. This was an ad hoc effort to develop a line of defence and act as our legitimate international governing body. Parkour Earth's website read:

> "Parkour Earth is the International Federation for Parkour/Freerunning/Art du Déplacement. As such, it will be the custodian of the philosophy, integrity, and sovereignty of the sport, art and/or discipline of Parkour/Freerunning/Art du Déplacement internationally for and on behalf of the international community. It will also serve as the sole governing and administering body for Parkour/Freerunning/Art du Déplacement internationally to protect the rights, freedoms and promote the interests of traceurs/traceuses, freerunners, practitioners, members & the international community. Parkour Earth will comprise of and lead the international community from a platform of good governance, sound democratic process, and ethical conduct. By the community, for the community."

I know exactly what you're thinking. Despite its loose bureaucratic language, this seems all over the place. This is supposedly the sole competent democratic representative of our sport, hosting a roster of some of our community's most remarkable minds to take back what's

rightfully ours. However, even to the average practitioner, it comes off as unorganised fluff haphazardly patched together by the old-guard purists of the past. It mentions "sound democratic process", but if you allow me to quote Monty Python, "I didn't vote for 'em!"

It was led by a board of directors and representatives whose names are barely recognised by anyone from the active community. Granted, I wouldn't trust parkour's top Instagram influencers with the job either. Imagine putting Bob Reese or Dominic Di Tommaso at the helm.

These are purportedly the heroes who will save us from the brink of bureaucratic tyranny, and I know people say heroes don't wear capes, but I should hope they don't wear brightly coloured XXXL *Skotchypstiks* joggers either!

TV ratings were plummeting for the Olympics, and FIG and the International Olympic Committee needed all the edgy lifestyle sports they could get their grubby hands on to wrangle the viewership of young people. To thwart FIG, our best defensive strategy was for our federation to offer our own competitions as an alternative. However, many Parkour Earth board members remained immovable in their staunch anti-competitive stance, sometimes to the point where any conversation on the matter was shut down, with the false claims that it doesn't align with the majority of the community's wishes. Despite most of the community moving on from many old issues, Parkour Earth was comprised mainly of people who were still unwilling to cede to the sport's natural evolution, and thus failing to offer an alternative of substance in the face of being swallowed by the powerful gymnastics federation.

Sadly, Parkour Earth severely lacked backing from the broader community. Most of the community that engaged with Parkour Earth were also old-guard anti-competition purists with antiquated views. So, the federation that set out to democratically represent the community's views was actually operating in a small echo chamber. Thus, their description was littered with archaic terms such as *Art du Déplacement*, *traceur*, and *traceuse*, which are confusing not only to the general public but also to newer practitioners under 35.

All in all, in attempting to represent the community as a whole, they only further demonstrated how divided, unorganised, and confused we are. If I put myself in the shoes of the average non-practitioner reading the above description, I imagine I would immediately wonder, "Why are there three names for the same thing?" And "Why are there so many names for those who practice it?" And "What do they mean by *philosophy*?"

It seems that no one organisation or institution can single-handedly unify and represent the community. But it begs the question: how can we unify something so broad?

A more prominent example of division is how many within our community accepted FIG as their new autocratic overlords, whether due to the hefty prize pools of their competitions or because they were sold on the Olympic dream. Switzerland's Christian Harmat brilliantly summed up why in a Swapping Shoes podcast when he asked, "Are we going to build strong houses to survive the tsunami, or are we going to try and surf on it?"

Which can simply be translated to, "I'd rather selfishly exploit the opportunity than help to defend parkour's independence."

The number of us jumping aboard the tsunami since 2017 has increased exponentially. It has been frustratingly odd to watch their competitions as FIG attempts to reinvent the wheel with an objective scoring system, unimaginative courses, and ad hoc rules, instead of using the hundreds of prior parkour competitions as a ready-made blueprint. Our grassroots organisations have painstakingly refined formats since the first competition in 2007, to create entertaining formats that best represent the sport as it's broadly practised. FIG is trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. FIG's haphazard competition format seems to be shoehorning parkour into what increasingly resembles gymnastics, forcing competitors to abandon their unique creative expression and natural individual inclinations to appease the flawed objective judging criteria. And I doubt that it's even their intention to do so, as it's in their best interest to create something entertaining and representative of parkour to win over the community and gain public acceptance.

FIG has included members of our community in their parkour commission to help make decisions, some of whom were undoubtedly deeply embedded in our culture. Charles Perrière, head of the commission, is one of the sport's founders. However, my theory is that the current confusion over their competitions isn't due to a devious intent to turn parkour into gymnastics; it's because they don't understand what parkour is. They can't explain what distinguishes it from gymnastics, so they are unable to prevent it from turning into a form of gymnastics. I realise it's bold to say that one of the people responsible for starting parkour doesn't understand it, yet here I am saying it.

Why does the sport have three names? Why are some of us against competition? Why can't we decide on a simple noun for ourselves as practitioners? Are we a sport, an art, a philosophy or a discipline? Is parkour a counter-cultural, rebellious act for athletically gifted young men to peacock online, or an accessible leisure activity for all? Are the differences between parkour and gymnastics enough for them to stake a claim to the sport? Why do some of us feel compelled to make videos of ourselves doing flips dressed as Pikachu? And again, why do we have a definition for what we do that nowhere near reflects the general visual characteristics or intentions of those who practice it?

Impetus

At this juncture, I want to make clear that I don't claim to be any authority on parkour. Nor should you view me as such. However, as someone who has been practising parkour without relent since 2006, with the community consistently at the centre of my world ever since, I feel there might be some insights to glean from my attempts to organise my thoughts on our beloved practice, culture, and community. Throughout my years of training, I've done my best to have my finger on the pulse of the various sects and groups along the pseudo-political spectrum, from conservative to progressive. (*Conservatives* can be categorised as those who view parkour as a legacy and ideology to maintain (otherwise known as purists), and

progressives are those who view parkour as an ever-changing and evolving macrocosm, rich with various branches of styles and ideas that can be palatable to a wide breadth of different personality types.)

I have been lucky enough to visit 41 countries and countless cities, and to train with and converse with practitioners in their communities. I have been fortunate to be invited to deliver talks and workshops at numerous international parkour events. I have been writing social commentary in educational, sarcastic, and generally irreverent tones through my series of over 700 Callum Tips.

Although this is embarrassingly starting to sound like a whole lot of autofellatio, my point is that my words come from a place of experience, borderline embarrassing nerdiness, and undying sincerity —rather than just the words of a member of the most famous and successful parkour team who thought he'd capitalise on his clout to sell a bunch of books before he becomes too old and irrelevant...

Full disclosure: I didn't want to write a book. In the last few years, practically every time I've written a long-winded *Callum Tip* for an Instagram caption, people comment that I should write a book. This is cute, considering these captions were a couple of paragraphs at most, which begged the question whether they had ever even seen a book in real life before. Despite appreciating the compliments, I had not genuinely given the thought the time of day. Maybe at the very most, one of those little books that you flick through when sitting on the toilet. So, while you're squeezing out a stubborn poo, you can chuckle at some poignant though more often nonsensical Callum Tips. Maybe with some silly illustrations or something (DM me if you're an illustrator who wants to collaborate on a book for people to poo with).

This book came about because, in 2021, I was tasked with writing blog posts for the Storror website to improve its Search Engine Optimisation, so that when people search for terms like *parkour* or *parkour clothing,* our website would appear higher in search rankings. Three examples of my first articles were *'5 tips for starting parkour', 'Top 10 shoes for parkour'* and one that I assumed to be a more straightforward, *'What is parkour?'*. Essentially, the kind of drivel where the target audience is noobs and their parents.

I set out to blast through the simpler one first, 'What is Parkour?'. So, naturally, I spent a couple of months procrastinating. Then, when I set out to start, I was immediately struck with writer's block. I realised I desperately needed inspiration to write anything more than a short paragraph. I went straight to Wikipedia, and even though I half knew what to expect, it still made me chuckle. At the same time, it made me equally frustrated.

I felt compelled to conduct a poll on my Instagram story, featuring a screenshot of the Wikipedia page with the definition highlighted. With no further context provided, I simply offered a choice of *'agree'* or *'disagree'*. I expected it to be laughed at and brushed off as an outdated definition from a bygone era of our sport's infancy. But the results surprised me.

I was unsure why, but this story got more views and engagement than any other story I'd posted before: over 43,000 views and 15,000 votes. It's hard to gauge the validity of the results, as I have no idea how much of my following practices the sport. To my astonishment, 67% agree with the definition, and 33% disagree. That's two-thirds in agreement!

I wondered whether the results were purely due to the vagueness of the line of questioning, since many people may think definitions are concrete rather than constantly shifting with how words are used and perceived. Some may have thought, "That's what the definition has always been known as. Therefore, that's what it is and what it shall remain." I decided to post another poll with a more explicit question. Again, with the highlighted definition, except this time, I asked, "Does this definition accurately describe the way you practice parkour?" And miraculously, the results swung the other way —a total of over 14,000 votes: 31% for *YES* and 69% for *NO.*

Again, the results may have been skewed by the fact that I failed to tell people who don't do parkour not to vote. Not that it would have helped much, as the internet is the Wild West, and some people have no respect for rigorous scientific inquiry! Either way, the new poll's results align far more with reality than the first poll. (Although I'd like to see how those in the 31% practice, and then judge whether they indeed train in line with the definition.)

This is for Us

So that's the story of how this whole thing came about. What began as a brief article resulted in my spiralling into madness, and I emerged years later with a hefty tome of over 170,000 words. The target audience has shifted from the complete beginner or a curious member of the lay public to the fully immersed practitioner. (My deepest apologies if you're a young whippersnapper who bought this book hoping to pick up some tips on how to do a kong vault. You should have read the blurb!)

That's right—this book is for us! This isn't a parkour book for the Waterstones customer. This isn't a parkour book that merely skims the surface of the sport, offering a general overview with trite quotes about challenging yourself, finding your own way and letting your inner uniqueness shine through. This certainly isn't another pompous academic ethnographic book on parkour that will put you to sleep with whole chapters on post-modernism. This book delves deep into the belly of the beast and holds absolutely no punches to the lower intestine and pancreas.

The definition is merely the jumping-off point. What you are about to read is not only my internal rant following these poll results, but also a torrent of thoughts on parkour that have been stewing in me for the longest time. Don't think of this book as the be-all and end-all definitive compendium on parkour; this is merely an organisation of my thoughts on the parkour community's numerous squabbles, quibblings and quandaries surrounding our sport and culture. Please note that it primarily comprises my opinions and observations, and shouldn't be taken as gospel. With this in mind, do your best not to take any of the nasty man's words to heart if they offend you or don't align with your views. (Even though your views are most probably wrong and stupid!) I assure you, there will be many things with which you may disagree. But that's okay, as hearing views that oppose your own, no matter how absurd and irritating, will only lead you further towards a more well-rounded estimation of the truth. We find comfort among those who agree with us—growth among those who don't.

I am merely attempting to wade through the mist to help you become more readily equipped to aid in the well-being of the parkour community, culture and industry. I aim to outline the divides and commonalities, convince you of the practice's beautiful breadth and diversity, and ultimately turn you all into zealous parkour advocates. And if all else fails, it will hopefully, at the very least, be a bit of fun.

Chapter 2 - The Finer Details

Let's start by picking apart the finer details of the definition to trim the fat of what is more exclusionary, rather than unifying themes that make up parkour today. They can appear fairly minor, but they're important to get out of the way early doors, especially as they set some foundational groundwork for the rest of the book. For starters, why have we fallen upon the word *discipline* instead of sport? And if you're newer to parkour, the term *'traceur'* may be more confusing. Historically, people have heralded parkour as higher than a mere sport. People have said that parkour should be considered a discipline among the ranks of ancient martial arts and the like. I believe people took this and ran with it for three reasons.

The Contrarian Pseudonymous Disciples of Old

The first reason is that that's what the founders of parkour said, and there was a long period where whatever they said was considered an unamendable holy writ. The founders were indeed very disciplined for much of their training. Above all, their training was motivated by an incessant desire to make themselves strong in body and mind. They were obsessed with the idea of a warrior mindset, training very hard to strengthen themselves both physically and mentally, whether by breaking daunting jumps, performing countless repetitions of techniques, or completing various gruelling, arbitrary endurance challenges.

Today, however, the word *discipline* is far from a good descriptor of the general parkour community and how we train. Granted, many will persevere with a hard challenge or line for countless attempts until deemed complete, but the same is ubiquitous across sports, and most aren't dubbing themselves a discipline. Even someone new to skateboarding shows discipline by trying a kickflip a thousand times before landing it, yet skateboarding remains an action sport. I don't consider something that requires a tad of patience to

learn and progress a solid criterion for what makes an activity a discipline. I'm being pedantic and arguing semantics at this point. Still, various dictionary definitions imply a level of order, adherence to established guidelines and rules and behaving in a strict, controlled manner. This definition seems utterly incompatible with how parkour is broadly practised.

The second reason early practitioners insisted on being hailed as a discipline and refused the label of *sport* was that it lacked competitive connotations. The early parkour community had an outright vendetta against anything remotely competitive. Most early practitioners felt they were the righteous stewards, burdened with the noble responsibility of keeping their budding activity pure, so they rallied against anything that would inch us toward anything resembling team or action sports. That included commercialisation as well. The prevailing idea was that money and competition corrupt and pollute everything, so parkour had to remain something you did for yourself and yourself only. These were the purists' sanctimonious obligations, which they were steadfast to uphold on the internet forums whenever any wretched heathen stepped out of line. One could wonder if these purists enjoyed online arguments with heretics more than actually doing parkour. Sometimes, I wonder why the sports with the most freedom seem to have the most gatekeepers.

I have found old blog posts arguing that parkour aligns more closely with the definition of *discipline* than with that of *sport*. However, the definitions used are cherry-picked to support their argument. The more common definitions of *sport* have competition as a defining feature. Yet many others suggest that competition is an optional feature. There are parkour competitions, and we consider them optional. No one today will argue that parkour's overarching goal is competition. Definitions of *discipline* also refer to sport and competition. Maybe early practitioners just wanted their new thing to seem different.

The early practitioners felt a need to dissociate themselves from being something as feeble, narrow, and philosophically devoid as they considered a sport to be. God forbid it to be labelled as an extreme sport. You'd have really pissed off the purist keyboard

warriors with such a blasphemous utterance on the forums back in 2006.

Parkour erupted from its birthplace in the suburbs of Paris to the rest of the world after six crucial media pieces. The 2001 French film *Yamakasi*, the 2002 BBC commercial titled *Rush Hour*, the 2003 documentary *Jump London* and its 2005 sequel Jump Britain, the 2004 French film *District 13*, and let's not forget the famed intro scene to the 2006 Bond film *Casino Royale*.

This brings me to the third reason we clung to the term *discipline*. Following these crucial media releases, many earlier adopters of parkour were fringe and awkward teenage outcasts obsessed with protagonist-heavy fiction of the time, like The Matrix, Spider-Man, and Dragon Ball Z, to name just a few. The same is true today: parkour tends to attract young, nerdy misfits who don't gel with conventional sports. Ex-*Storm Freerun* member Ashley Holland even tattooed a Spider-Man symbol on his back. Another example is ex-Storm Freerun member, Pip Andersen (AKA Piptrix—the 'big-time Star Wars actor' who wound up playing a minor role and wore a mask for his crumb of screen time.) Pip's self-given nickname wasn't Piptrix because he liked to do tricks. It was because he was obsessed with The Matrix!

To set the scene for you a little more, everyone also had a cringe nickname, usually their internet forum alias. Self-given nicknames like Asid Dragon, EZ Styla, Frosti Fresh, Sticky, Kerby, Kiell, Kazuma, Zyrken, Cable, Forrest, Blane, Bane, Baconman, Blue Devil, Demon, Black Panther, Showtime, NoSole, Bam, Teghead, TK17, L1consolable, Jesse Danger, Ark Angel, Dead Reckoning, Vortex Omnivium the Ruler of the Fifth Realm, Safety, Chase Armitage (oh wait, that's actually his real name), and Amos Rendao (no, that's not actually his real name).

My point is that these early adopters were total contrarian weirdos. They took pride in being different and associating with this fringe new thing, with all its little teething issues, personality defects and complexes, which made it a bit edgy and unique. They were proud outcasts who took great pleasure in being among the original few of their little niche bubble. They viewed themselves as the

pioneering heroes of this burgeoning cultural movement, with fresh eyes to subvert a ripe urban landscape. When in reality, they were just geeky, obscenely-dressed goons doing crap dash vaults in very public places.

I don't see anything inherently bad about being labelled a sport or an action sport. Even putting aside how competition has become normalised, modern-day parkour is far closer to action sports than any mystical ancient martial art. We should drop the snobbish elitism accordingly.

Traceur (Confusion + Obfuscation = More Confusion)

What is a traceur? Apart from now being a pompous-sounding phrase that makes many of us wretch, it was adopted as the term for a parkour practitioner despite other clear, low-hanging options. I think this contrarian defect in our early-to-mid-00s predecessors is also largely responsible for our current struggle to agree on how to refer to ourselves as people who practise parkour.

For other activities, it's been easy to assign an appropriate noun. For example, a skateboarder, a footballer/soccer player, a tricker, a painter, a pianist, a mixed martial artist, a yogi, a gymnast, a ballet dancer, a surfer, etc. We apparently weren't satisfied with the easy '*er*', '*ist*', or '*player*' norms. Throughout our community's history, the conversation has come up from time to time, but we consistently fail to make any headway toward something we can agree on. One could think, "What could be simpler?" Honestly, it's difficult, but it's no one's fault but ours. For a few reasons, we're now left with some pretty shoddy options to pick from. Are we freerunners, parkour athletes, parkour artists, or are we traceurs? Many readers who are newer to parkour might never have even heard the word *traceur* until now, as its use has been in steady decline for years. Rightly so, as it's massively confusing for members of the public and ourselves. The fact that *traceur* has fallen out of common use speaks to its obscurity and the general acceptance that it's lame. It's now only used unironically by declining pockets of our community who claim to be old-school.

In a video, René Scavington even joked that a *traceur* is "a parkour practitioner who is old." But still, many of these old-school dinosaurs who still dub themselves as *traceurs* don't have a clue where it came from.

The word *traceur* was first coined by a group of early French pioneers, who named themselves *Les Traceurs*, a term derived from the French verb *tracer,* which can mean either *to trace* or *to rule a line*. Informally, *hurry up*. Then, around 2003, some of the OG Purist gang on the now-defunct *parkour.net* forum must have misinterpreted this and went on to say that anyone who trains parkour must be a traceur. And this was perhaps only reinforced by a 2007 New Yorker interview with David Belle, where his brother says, "A traceur is someone who traces David's footsteps, the way David traced our father's."

But this was most likely a retrofitted definition, as in a 2009 interview, Stephane Vigroux from Les Traceurs explains, "I don't know how we've come to this point, but basically, Traceurs is a group of practitioners. It was my brother Johann, Sebastien Goudot, Thomas Couetdic, Michael Ramdani, Kazuma, Johan Aoues, Sébastien Foucan, David Belle and I. It was a group after the Yamakasi had been created. It was a second group, and we called ourselves the Traceurs. Today, it is a common word. For me, it's a bit... It puts a limitation on the discipline."

But in 2003, people from France and further afield, who were desperately searching for answers about this mysterious new thing from the scarce scraps of information at the time, must have seen the word, in whatever context, and thought, "Fuck it, that's different. Let's run with it!" Rather than going for the obvious choice of *parkourist* or *parkourer*.

I know what you're probably thinking. You cringe at the sound of *parkourist* or *parkourer*, but it could have easily been one of the two. *Parkouriste* was featured in Sébastien Foucan's Trans World Sport segment, which was filmed during the Les Traceurs period. This is another sign that they weren't using *traceur* as their noun. *Parkouriste* was even used in the original treatment for the pivotal documentary *Jump London* in 2003. And it genuinely would have been easier with either of those two options. But no, we had to be

different and confuse everyone with this obtuse French slang term "*traceur*". And it didn't make it any less confusing when the Americans attempted to anglicise it to *'tracer'*, even though that was the French word from which the slang term *'traceur'* originated. Despite the horrendously received 2015 film titled *Tracers*, starring Taylor Lautner, the word still falls further and further from becoming common parlance among the public and us.

On top of that, somewhere along the line, this perfectly gender-neutral word was made gender binary, and the word *traceuse* was born for parkour's female practitioners. In my opinion, a word that is already confusing, stemming from a French origin, didn't need to be split up and made gender-specific. Can you think of many other sports with gender-specific nouns for practitioners? I could find B-boy and B-girl, which exist for obvious reasons, but they also have the option of breakdancer or breaker. Then I struggle, and my mind wanders beyond sport. I think of actor and actress, waiter and waitress, host and hostess, all of which are recently falling out of favour, as it's argued that separating terms can perpetuate the idea that women in certain professions are somehow different or less qualified than men in the same roles. In English, there is no *doctress*, only *doctor*. The inconsistency in the language can lead one to assume that being a doctor is a man's job and not a woman's.

Traceuse need not exist. But you could argue that it arose because in France and other countries, in their language, they have always been inclined to assign masculinity and femininity to people or inanimate objects. For example, the articles 'la', 'le', 'un' and 'une' ensure everyone and everything stays pointlessly and often arbitrarily gendered. But most likely, the original French guys didn't coin the word traceuse. It's more likely to have been conjured up by someone outside France after 2003. When I asked the early UK practitioner, Liv Rowland, she didn't even know where it came from.

Traceur was coined by David Belle, head of Les Traceurs, as the name for their exclusive, elite group after he peeled off from the Yamakasi in 1998. As far as I know, they didn't have a noun for those practising parkour in France at the time, for men or women. So few were doing it that there was perhaps no need for a noun. Maybe it was another

way for our contrarian predecessors to further obfuscate our already ambiguous sport.

Some still refer to themselves as *traceurs* and *traceuses*, while others call themselves freerunners (that can of worms will be opened later). Still, I'd say most people, including myself, use the term "parkour athlete" albeit reluctantly. And reluctantly, because it very inaccurately describes most people's practice. There are genuinely very few people whose training and lifestyle habits can be compared to those of actual athletes. Granted, much of what we do is similar to, or even in some cases, beyond the physical capacity of other sports. There are many people who are training rigorously for competitions or specific goals. The fact remains that banging the odd flip and precision between sips of Stella Artois, rolling a doobie and shooting the shit with your mates can hardly be compared to the rigours of the general image of an athlete's training and lifestyle. However, people who do e-sports professionally now call themselves athletes. I'll let you decide whether that blows my argument out of the water or if it's simply corroding or stretching the meaning of the word *athlete*. More importantly, the word *athlete* doesn't suit a proportion of the community in another way.

More recently, some have been using the term *parkour artists*. As well as throughout Vincent Thibault's book, *Parkour and the Art du Déplacement*. Some move in ways closer to an art form than an athletic sport. But for the many others whose practice consists of launching themselves at large running gaps that they're nowhere near ready for, or people whose training consists of chucking single move flips onto their backs with crash mats in a gym, it's a bit more of a stretch to pass as an environment subversive art form. Although many of you would agree that this title reflects how you practice, it would be hard to stick us all under that umbrella, as with *parkour athlete*.

Another easier option is *'parkour practitioner,'* but you might agree it has about nine syllables too many.

Honestly, it's sad we can't turn back time, save ourselves a lot of faff and confusion, and form a consensus that *parkourist* or *parkourer* is fine. Instead, we're inclined to cringe and snicker with embarrassment whenever a news reporter or journalist hasn't done their due diligence in researching to know that we're super cool and

have our special, niche little words. We would say, "Oh my god, I can't believe they said parkourist instead of traceur. How dumb!" when we're the childish and smug idiots deliberately being obscure with the word *traceur*!

Ryan Taggart has publicly made the argument for keeping the term *traceur*, positing that because this word has its roots in our origins, we would lose a sense of unique identity and ties to our heritage, which is already continually being diluted due to many of us trying to depict parkour as a more palatable product to the public by emulating other subcultures. And claimed it also dilutes the "philosophy" and principles that formed the bedrock on which parkour was initially developed.

The increase in the use of the word *traceur*, or the loss of it entirely, will not affect how the principles and philosophy are embodied among the community at large. Especially as most people practising haven't the foggiest idea of the principles and philosophies Ryan is speaking of. And you'll even be hard-pressed to get a clear answer from those who claim to understand and internalise the nebulous philosophy (but we'll come to that later on). Using a word doesn't miraculously generate any mentality, motivations or other ideas, especially if the ideas aren't already within the person's head. There's nothing magical about the word if there are no magical associations to those who use it. The majority of us dislike the word. The prevailing association with it is a sense of cringe.

There's a 2008 video in which a congregation of eager listeners surrounds Parkour Generations CEO Dan Edwardes as he outlines what it means to be a traceur, suggesting there's a philosophical barrier to entry to calling yourself one.

> "A traceur is someone who is a complete human being, someone who's very self-reliant physically, able to use the skills and knowledge physically to help people help themselves, but also mentally complete and with a strong spirit. It's very much about understanding yourself. Self-knowledge, self-improvement, and you can do that with any discipline. You could be doing bloody carpentry, you

know. It's all about how you approach your discipline. Pretty much one way is every way."

So very wise... It's as if straight from an old Shaolin movie. As a sixteen-year-old, seeing this, it was a miracle I didn't quit parkour altogether, let alone throw up in my mouth every time someone said *traceur*. Stuff like this is another reason to stack upon the pile of why *traceur* has fallen out of use. The users of the word are ideologically on a different planet from those who do parkour simply for fun.

What we're potentially witnessing with many of those who cling to the word *traceur* is a minority who are refusing to let go of a past that arose from confusion. Which, of course, only further confuses; we started using the word without knowing where it came from and continue to, and then we confuse any outsider who doesn't know the word.

They are hoarding a word, grasping desperately onto a dying idea because they identify with this naive and nostalgic golden era. But the idea isn't in the word itself. Of course, none of this would matter if *traceur* stuck and was widely accepted. But the fact that it hasn't stuck and is nowhere near the broadly accepted term says enough. It's time to let it die and agree on a suitable alternative.

I am all for pushing for the term *parkourist* as our noun. If you ignore all the times you've cringed when your parents and members of the lay public have butchered the term, it's not that bad. And you have to admit, it just seems to make sense. More so than *parkourer*, which phonetically sounds too much like an Indian deep-fried snack or an onomatopoeia for throwing up. And if you have a North American accent, it's such an 'R' salad that you sound like a Furby that's low on battery when you say it.

The term *freerunner* has its positives. It's pretty descriptive of the ways many of us practice. There is quite often running involved. And it's often pretty free regarding how it's practised. René Scavington opined in an article called *Parkour Specifically* that when you say *freerunner*, "It sounds like you're about to go take a jog in a field! It would be cool if it sounded like artistically applying complex skills, such as acrobatics, to any environment. But it doesn't. It just

sounds like some sort of alternative form of jogging, perhaps without shoes or underwear, whilst giggling."

Also, that noun sure does have a lot of baggage, what with it being attached to our sport's silly, confusing and increasingly redundant second name, *freerunning*. But we're getting way ahead of ourselves. As I said, we'll open that can of worms later.

Parkourist makes the most sense from an outside perspective; this is evident from the number of times we've been naturally labelled as such by journalists, the public, and our parents. I think most of the parkour community has now grown up enough not to feel the urge to intentionally shroud our practice in mystery. I think we're past taking ourselves that seriously. If we want to promote the sport for the benefit of our industry and get more people to enjoy it, we would do well to present ourselves clearly to those outside our bubble.

Parkourist, for me, is the best option for clarity, but as we've seen with *traceur*, words can't be brute-forced into everyday vocabulary. Words need to be accepted organically and unobtrusively. But for the sake of being an arsehole, for the rest of the book, I'll be using *parkourist*. And who knows, by the time you've gotten to the end, maybe it'll stop feeling so weird to say.

Assisting Equipment

The Wikipedia definition states "in a complex environment". We know this can't be a defining characteristic of the sport. Sure, you have more options for movement in a complex environment with endless angles and shapes. However, the most creative visionaries often narrow their field of vision to minimal environments, continuously seeking more interesting and challenging movements and combinations, even with just a single wall, handrail, flat vertical surface, or a chain-link fence. Egg from the US is a prime example of making something out of nothing, having shared creative, intricate ideas online daily for over 3,000 days.

One thing Wikipedia has generally got right is the lack of aid from assisting equipment. It's just you and your four limbs. Although

sometimes three limbs. Max Runham from London has been missing most of one arm since birth and was a talented staple in the London scene for many years. Before he started practising parkour, the young Spanish anomaly, Ruben Roldan, lost his left leg in a farm accident when he was nine, and he remains incredible. Yadollah Gholami from Iran is missing a leg and still thriving. And the newest member of the tripod club, as of 2018, Mat Armitage, had his right foot amputated after a horrific motorcycle accident. All can still train and progress.

The fact that we need no equipment to practice and progress is fantastic, making parkour theoretically one of the most accessible sports in the world. Vanya Palchik from Ukraine is a good example of why taking a hard stance on the use of assistive equipment is complicated. Vanya is missing the lower half of his right leg and uses crutches to perform parkour. One could argue that Ruben, Yadollah and Mat all seem to manage fine without them, but in Vanya's case, the crutches introduce a certain uniqueness.

On the face of it, the extent of *assisting equipment* we use is a good pair of shoes. However, the *good* part is being challenged by a growing number of people who prioritise form over function. Many will wear clunky, inflexible skate shoes, but some will still somehow be really thin, deluding themselves into thinking they're decent for parkour, when, subconsciously, they're just manifesting their individuality through their unique fashion choices, which, coincidentally, happen to emulate skate culture to a tee.

Sometimes we'll use chalk on the hands and, occasionally, on the shins. Occasionally, grip tape is used for challenges that would otherwise be nearly impossible. The latter has gotten pushback from some purist characters because you are:

1. Altering the environment to suit you and making challenges more manageable when you should be adapting to the environment.

2. Because you're committing one of the age-old deadly sins of parkour that goes against the holy commandment, *Leave No Trace*, which ultimately means leave your training ground as you found it, out of respect for the spot, the property owners or the public who also use the space. (Recently, at a parkour park in Merstham, I saw that

some buffoon had scrawled "LEAVE NO TRACE" in Sharpie, in huge block capitals across one of the obstacles. Obscenely ironic!)

But given the perfect dimensions of a challenge, sometimes it would be rude to pass up if it is otherwise impossible and if the grip tape is removable or in a space where other people rarely come into contact. For example, when filming Roof Culture Asia in 2016, we taped a take-off ledge for an 18-foot-wide roof gap in Seoul, South Korea. Not only was it the perfect roof gap with the perfect dimensions, but the tape was placed where no one was likely to come into view or tread again for years. Or at least until another parkourist does the jump, as Seoul local Jiho did in 2021.

As for respecting property owners, I couldn't care less about commercial property beyond preserving it for our own means. In other words, don't shit where you eat. The same goes for doing your best to maintain a polite relationship with staff or security when getting kicked off—they will be less inclined to give you any leeway if you're an argumentative arse. As for residential property, it should go without saying: don't trash people's stuff. In public spaces, unless you're significantly obstructing walkways, I see nothing wrong with making minor changes – like adding grip tape or attaching small wooden blocks – that create entirely new challenges. These alterations are mostly inconspicuous to the public and, if anything, merely show signs of life, as with graffiti.

On a larger scale, some create new spots in otherwise completely disused public spaces, like Lewisham Parkour and Supa XXL did with Yard in London, and as we did with Sui 2 in Brighton. In 2020, Darryl Stingley and Garrett Eaves built a spot below a bridge in Pittsburg, California. Gyms were closed due to COVID-19, and the US hates building parkour parks because everyone's too sue-happy over there. So, they took it upon themselves to create something accessible for everyone. Despite encouragement from the community and the neighbourhood, one city worker caught wind, and what took three weeks to build was torn down in two hours. Brighton's Sui 2 has also been destroyed, and all the climbing holds we drilled in on Sui Wall in 2022 were removed, despite posing no problems for anyone. Even the two modest-sized concrete kickers up the wall that skaters had built had been removed. The city will remove unsanctioned creative

spaces in public areas that act as signs of life in an otherwise neoliberal city. While writing this, the bars and concrete-filled walls of Yard in London remain and serve as a tucked-away communal hub shielded from the year-round rain under a bridge. Hopefully, it stays that way. This is all to say I don't fully buy into the old *'Leave No Trace'* dogma, especially in a city that doesn't value you unless you're a consumer. But that still doesn't mean you should leave a trail of trash behind at every spot.

Grip tape is often used in film productions involving parkour, but the movement serves the production's visual outcome, not the performer's intrinsic gain or the perceived difficulty for an audience. Whereas at a spot during a training session, you're undermining your ability to adapt to different surfaces if you only ever alter anything that challenges you. There are times when people use grip tape with brazen indifference and ignorance. I've been at IMAX in London before and found grip tape strips on the top of one of the walls and, more stupidly, draped over a segment of one of the handrails against the wall. I assume someone stuck the tape on the rail because they didn't want to land and slip out on a slippery rail. But, as I said, the rail was up against the wall—there is nowhere for you to slip to! The wall will stop you if you land badly enough to slip forward.

Imagine modifying a well-established spot by other parkourists because you need to add grip as a crutch, because you can't do the challenges that others have done without. And, of course, when the tape is left there, the spot remains modified for every future user, preventing others from completing the challenges legitimately, as those who have done so before.

At Storror's first Big Wall Open event at Sui Wall in Brighton, several parkourists were doing the iconic wall run across the slant over the stairs in various ways unseen before. Numerous people were landing on and taking off the surrounding handrail. Mathieu Brulard from France was eyeing up something completely new. Amid the chaos and others lining up for their turn, Mathieu busts out a roll of grip tape and slaps it over the rail for a grippier takeoff. Despite everyone else making do and "playing it as it lies", Mathieu saw it necessary to modify the spot for his personal goal. Don't get me

wrong, the outcome was incredible. He sprinted into a rail takeoff, took only two giant steps along the slanted wall and spun 270 degrees to land atop the stairs. Whether it was possible without the grip tape or not, he taped the rail for his assurance and confidence while everyone else made do. And of course, everyone else didn't have a choice but to use the rail without the tape for the rest of the event.

Madrid has a rich history of upper-echelon parkourists who have performed incredible feats despite the slick faces of many of their walls and the dusty rails. Hypothetically, imagine if, overnight, some grip tape fairies irreversibly grip-taped all their spots, leaving them with perfect grip. Madrid is already one of the best cities for training, and if every surface had perfect grip, it would be a monumental improvement. However, for anyone who hits any of the incredible feats that have been done before, there will be a reduced perceived value of the accomplishment. Every accomplishment before that fateful night that the grip tape fairies came will always be respected as more difficult. Some might say, "Did you see that Shifer did the big kong pre at Tres Cantos?" For another to reply, "Yeah, but Cosmin did it before the grip tape fairies."

The handrail at Sui Wall, the blue-painted walls at IMAX and the entirety of Madrid may be slippery, but we're all in the same boat on a level playing field with the same disadvantages. Learning how to interact with different surfaces is part of what we do, so it makes little sense – and only does you a disservice – to consistently alter your environment instead of gaining something by adjusting your technique or returning when you're better prepared.

Gloves & Shoes

Other assisting equipment, such as gloves, protective pads, and other safety gear, is shunned and laughed at. If you're seen wearing gloves, for whatever benign excuse you can muster, you'll be ridiculed by your peers. I remember one excuse from a guy whose full-time job was as a chef for a respectable restaurant. He wore gloves because his boss had been giving him grief for coming into work with dirt

remnants on his hands from training the day before. You may be thinking, "Just wash your fucking hands better, buddy!" But we've all had training sessions where we'll be left with some afterglow specks the following day, especially if you had accidentally popped up to grab a ledge smothered in a thick, fresh layer of anti-climb paint. Sure enough, despite the Chef's fairly reasonable excuse for wearing the gloves, his mates had none of it, and he was a laughing stock, berated within an inch of his life.

"Only noobs wear gloves! It's external clothing to aid grip and protect your flesh, and that's just ridiculous!" One could argue that shoes are just gloves for your feet. But I hear you say, "But Callum! With gloves, you're protecting your skin when you really should be toughening the skin." Yep, if you trained barefoot consistently, you'd also gradually build stronger and tougher feet. I also hear you say, "But Callum! The grip of some gloves provides too much aid with walls and bars, and you should be building those qualities with proper technique and adequate strength." Again, what do you think shoes do? Are we not always seeking shoes with the best grip and shock absorption? Also, think of all the times you've stuck a hoodie on whenever you know you're about to do a roll on concrete. You bloody hypocrite! (Whilst on the subject, your idol Damien Walters wore a spine brace for some of the stunts in his old showreels. Sorry to break your hearts.) We applaud anyone who does something barefoot because we recognise how much harder it is. For example, Leo Urban and the Manpower Gap, or any of Phil Doyle's or Mathieu Jang's barefoot videos.

I'm far from saying we should wear gloves or that we should all stop wearing shoes or practice parkour butt naked. I'm just pointing out that we're all victims of culture and its dogmas to some extent. And parkour culture is rife with silly dogmas. Shoes are assisting equipment, which we agree is acceptable to use, whereas gloves are not. Other sports also agree on the level of support their footwear provides for achieving specific outcomes. Olympic weightlifters use specialised shoes with a sturdy, stiff sole and a slightly elevated heel, as these features aid their sport. You could argue (and people do) that you should build a sturdy base with good technique and foot strength, and then work on your ankle flexibility,

rather than wearing a shoe to help you into more advantageous positions. But it's more widely accepted that this assisting footwear is fine, allowing everyone to train and compete on a level playing field. Sprinters, footballers, etc, all have studded soles to suit their sport's specific demands. Long-distance runners use increasingly thick, squishy soles, and the technology is ever-improving to spare the muscles and tendons from doing the work. Apart from the pee-drinking barefoot/minimalist runners, this is generally agreed upon. However, the technology is advancing so rapidly that when Eliud Kipchoge broke the 2-hour marathon mark by 20 seconds while wearing a costly shoe developed specifically by Nike, the record was disputed by some. (Also, because they created conditions that eliminated wind resistance.) I'm not aware of any such controversy within parkour yet. We seem to agree on footwear in general, but maybe we're yet to discuss whether springy boots are acceptable.

Safety Equipment

Pads and helmets are another assisting equipment cultural dogma. Nathan Barris is an original member of the UK-based, old-school team 3Run. During his first days of training with his 3Run buddies, his concerned parents allowed him to train on the condition that he wore safety pads. As expected, he turned up and was a laughingstock amongst his 3Run bros. I believe the nickname "Safety" still lives on to this day, over twenty years on.

Jesse Laflair, a well-known US community figure – who was already traversing thin ice with his reputation in the European community for various reasons – made a video aimed at opening an honest conversation about why using safety pads might be acceptable in some situations. He argued that, when training for a new move for competition or performing in high-stakes scenarios, it might be permissible to use a helmet and pads. He explained that we already use crash mats and foam pits in gyms and trampolines to develop and learn new skills. This helps bridge the gap between learning something that's dangerous and mastering it to the point where you can confidently execute it safely on harder ground.

You guessed it—Jesse's video was a laugh riot, and even to this day, he hasn't completely shaken it off his reputation. Despite the video being removed, the scornful parkour community never forgets. In the old Storror video, *Chaps On Tour USA*, a kid wearing shin pads introduces himself as Jesse Laflair before jumping squarely onto his shins from a wall. The fact that Jesse also got ripped on for doing moves using his shins was another layer to the joke. (Which again stemmed from another cultural dogma that using your knees and shins is wrong.)

It's the norm for various sports to use safety gear. Some seem arbitrary on the surface until you dig deeper and find either practical reasons or cultural reasons. We can safely say that fencing masks are a practical necessity. The mask isn't simply to keep the flies away from their aristocratic faces. Why do NFL players wear helmets, shoulder pads, thigh and knee pads, whereas Rugby players only wear a gum shield and occasionally a comparatively thin scrum cap? Some Brits and Aussies might argue that Americans are soft, but regardless of how true that may be, it's likely more due to the difference in the number of contacts each game has. American football will have more forceful head-on collisions due to frequent stoppages in play. In contrast, rugby is played with a more continuous flow, reducing the intensity of each contact. Tackling techniques also differ, but that's likely due to the pads players wear—or lack. Pads in American football can lead to more aggressive, riskier tackles due to a false sense of security. Rugby players without the padding are often incentivised to develop more strategic tackling techniques to avoid injury.

In skateboarding, vert skaters wear pads, but street skaters don't. The bails tend to be different between the two. Vert skaters regularly use transitions to knee slide out, making knee pads a necessity to avoid stripping their knees of flesh. Street skaters don't generally wear pads because, aside from them being heavy, cumbersome and restrictive, they typically don't protect the body parts that street skaters injure the most. You could go skating in a suit of medieval armour and still sprain your ankle. There are, of course, cultural elements as well. Style and image are of grave importance for many skaters. You can't look drippy if bulky knee pads ruin your fit.

Similarly to us, there's pressure from community norms—skaters don't want to be excluded for being the dweeb who cares about their health. And finally, like us, many think you need to learn how to fall adequately so you're not relying on safety gear that likely won't save you.

People's beef with any equipment in parkour is cultural, as it often stems from a belief that self-reliance is a virtue. People will argue that we're supposed to be learning to move well and make good judgment calls about whether we're ready to commit to a dangerous challenge and, of course, have a pre-planned failsafe if it doesn't go as planned. The idea is that the incremental stepping stones of progression should remain internal and come when you're prepared to face the objective hazard of your challenge. When we wear pads, we reduce that self-reliance and add a buffer that acts as a safety net. (Spotting for jumps might also spring to mind.)

Crash Mats & False Milestones

But Jesse LaFlair had a point. We use crash mats quite often in a variety of contexts. Most of the time, when we learn a new flip, there's something soft involved to reduce the severity of the consequence if we fail. This is standard for flips, as new flips are technically complex and a lot happens in the blink of an eye. They usually require numerous attempts to get right. In other words, you can land on your head on concrete if you don't engrain the movement first. We can distil this decision-making down to a simple mathematical calculation:

> High risk + high consequence + no viable intermediate steps to execute the technique without making it dynamic = it should probably not be done. Try on something softer than concrete first.

But interestingly, we don't extend this mindset to everything. It seems there is one rule for one thing and one for another. Is there that much difference between using a crash mat and wearing the equivalent of a

crash mat? Is there that much difference between it being on you instead of under you?

One reason might be that it's easier to conceal that you're wearing protection under your clothes from viewers, as I mentioned with Damien Walters and his spine brace, which fooled his viewers. But with the advancements in video post-production technology, it's easier than ever to edit out crash mats in videos. But who on earth would go through the effort of doing that just to fake a jump or stunt? Storm Freerun definitely would! In practically any of their early iconic videos where Claudiu Voicu was behind the filming and editing, you can be assured that a crash mat will be edited out of it at some point.

Remember at the beginning of *Storm Freerun - Volume 1*, the notorious Trafalgar Square dive front flip by Paul 'Blue' Joseph? Remember Paul 'Blue' Joseph's massive front flip, followed by a gigantic drop roof gap in the first half of *Storm Origins*? Claudiu Voicu's *Mirror's Edge* video, when Pip Anderson (Piptrix, the big-time Star Wars film star with a boner for The Matrix) does a colossal roof gap, filmed in POV? This is the same huge roof gap that Max and Benj Cave did in the original *Roof Culture* video. Max and Benj used crash mats for the landing and didn't use camera trickery or deceptive editing to hide them. Sadly, the same can't be said for Claudiu and Pip's video, or for any of the videos listed above.

It sure does become dubious when parkourists start faking things that would otherwise be physical and mental milestones for the individual and the community. This was also happening before the community even really existed. In Jump London in 2003, Sébastien Foucan's famous jump on HMS Belfast had a crash mat on landing. And despite apparent efforts to conceal the mat with camera angles and cuts, you can still see that a bit of the crash mat pops into view on one shot of the landing. The purist crowd must have been devastated to learn that one of their righteous, saintly and pure-spirited founders of parkour could commit such a heinous and deceitful misdeed.

As a side note, while on the subject of Storm Freerun and faking milestone moments, we need to address Kie Willis's iconic 2013 showreel and its somewhat questionable cuts. The very last show-stopping clip was doctored. The dive cat pass to precision to the

yellow staircase at London's Hayward Gallery is a feat that has not yet been repeated. On Kie's attempt, he overshot horrifically and landed in a heap in the stairwell, coming away with a badly injured heel. Kie returned when his heel had recovered enough to get a clip doing the precision down on its own while wearing the same clothes. Then he seamlessly slotted the new clip into the edit, with a deceptive cut following the botched take-off clip. Almost a perfect crime! If you play it at 0.25x speed, a keen eye can see clearly that his trajectory is set to overshoot before it cuts to the bogus landing.

Although the first send is iconic and deserving of respect regardless of execution, it's pretty lame and deceptive that he covered up the mishap and cunningly represented it as a flawless success. Something that could be considered a substantial level-up and part of parkour history was skewed by cheap, jarring camera trickery, which fabricated a more flattering, heroic image and legacy.

Aren't personal accomplishments just hollow if they're a manufactured outcome for the viewer's perception?

Suppose we, as a culture, value self-reliance and clear milestones for ourselves and the community, without deceitful tactics. In that case, it indeed leaves the grey area for crash mats and other assisting equipment very hazy. A crash mat, grip tape, gloves and safety pads all help get the job done effectively and safely. And most of us appreciate that safety and self-preservation are of paramount importance. But when these 'safety nets' undermine the internal process you'd otherwise have to put yourself through, it begs the question: are you doing a jump for the objective outcome of the jump, or are you doing the jump for what the jump does *to* you? Is it the final product and the video clip that comes with it, followed by praise from peers and strangers online, or is it what you gain from going through every step of the challenge and its effect on you, your skill and future practice?

I know what you're thinking; the whole 'journey is more important than the destination' cliché! This might seem pseudo-philosophical and even pretentious, but I think many of us already feel this in our community. In fact, a certain divisive controversy might spring to mind.

Grey Trophies

On the 5th of May 2019, Arthur Franks of Team Phat did the unthinkable. He stuck the iconic cat pass precision down over the drop at IMAX 1. By this point, numerous others have made the cat pass, but many usually overshot or completely sailed over the landing wall. Before that day, no one had come close to sticking it. Numerous people had simply attempted to make the cat pass itself and had put far too much gas into it, completely missing the landing wall and eating the heavy impact on the concrete pathway behind. I'd love to know the number of bruised heels the challenge has accumulated over the years. A year before his stick, Arthur Franks had done the same on his first attempt and reined it well on subsequent attempts. It's understandable for people to overshoot the cat pass because of the horrendous drop between take-off and landing, but it shows how many who attempted it were far from ready. They likely hadn't come close to that kind of high-to-low cat pass in their training beforehand.

From my observations, whenever something is widely perceived as a trophy jump or challenge in the community, people are drawn to it with tunnel vision, missing integral steps in their progress to attain the trophy and the respect that comes with it. This expedient, gung-ho attitude often results in missing the necessary data to make safe, rational judgments. With pressure to be seen as skilled among your peers, or an impatient need to be heralded as one of the greats, mixed with these holes in the process, you're left with a leap of faith. And that's what we saw with all these terribly judged overshoot attempts with the cat pass at IMAX. We saw people who wanted to be among the handful of names who had done it, but they didn't have the prerequisite experience to execute it properly.

Needless to say, this is also what is happening with the new iconic kong front flip to precision over the same IMAX gap. Originally sent flawlessly by Dom Tomato in 2021, who had incrementally prepared since having set it as a goal two years before committing, then swiftly followed by Max Webbi and Ole Mørland Johnsen, both within six months of Dom initially doing it. However, the two hungry trophy hunters overshot horrifically, leading many to assume they were either unlucky or frantically rushing to be held in the same

regard as Dom and be included in the history books. Webbi from Basingstoke came away with a broken wrist. Johnsen from Norway appeared to have come away unscathed. He was likely left feeling pretty invincible, as he later tried his luck to become the second to do another Dom Tomato Southbank accolade—the even bigger cat pass front to precision by Westminster Bridge. However, he was not so lucky this time and dramatically undershot, landing in a heap in a two-foot-wide gap between the landing wall and a handrail. Sadly, this hungry trophy hunter will more likely be etched into the history books as a tech-less, happy-go-lucky, body-hucking, clout-chasing novice.

Of course, this is not to say by any means that everyone who makes a mistake while working at their limit is an idiotic clout chaser. Not at all. In 2017, many people threw shade and criticised Satchel from Colorado's *Try Hard Collective* for attempting and bailing on Luke Stones' double cat pass down at IMAX. A bunch of Satchel's Colorado buddies and community leaders, like Ryan Ford, chimed in to defend his honour, attesting that he's not some glory-chasing schmuck with little self-knowledge and self-preservation. Shit does just happen sometimes, even when you're careful and logically consider all factors.

There is often a culmination of other very telling clues that accompany the mistake, pointing to whether a person is an extrinsically motivated body-hucker. For instance, they appear quite unspectacular in every other video compared to the hefty challenge they miserably failed. And also having an Instagram handle such as @highonflips... Sorry, Ole Mørland Johnsen. Another well-known sign is yelling, "Corkboy, let's go" before doing something.

A significant reason why people overshoot the IMAX cat pass is undoubtedly the scary drop. High consequences play with your mind. Avoiding the drop was the main priority for everyone who tried. Compared to other common trophy challenges that are scary but often centred around power output, you can run at it, send it, and be fine. Or the Man Power gap in Évry, which is essentially a massive drop to a fluffed-up pile of pebbles. In contrast, the IMAX cat pass over the drop is far more than just an output game. It's more or less

the complete package. It's highly physical, technical and mental, and all of these are linked. It's enormous in scale and high impact, but doesn't require too much power (at least for the average parkourist who'd tend to consider it a possibility), so it's technically tricky because you need to rein in the power. This, combined with the added consequence of the drop, creates a formidable challenge to commit to.

The combination of this outrageous difficulty, the lack of power needed to make the gap, and it being held up as a trophy jump results in a lot of impatient and clout-hungry scallywags overshooting and picking up some severely bruised heels and compressed ankles. And that's why it was so amazing when Arthur Franks stuck it. It's legitimately impressive to stick something so huge, scary and hard to judge.

So, what caused the controversy? People's issue was that crash mats were used. On the first attempt, he made it without a stick with a mat draped over the landing wall, but with no mat on the ground below between the take-off and landing. Then, on the second attempt, there were only mats on the walkway in front, where so many had overshot in the past. On the third go, Arthur nails a picture-perfect stick with the mats on the ground below, between the take-off and landing, but none on the landing wall or the pathway in front.

Rightfully so, everyone at IMAX witnessing this world's first goes wild. The clip was uploaded to Instagram, where everyone else went wild as well. Although some praised Arthur's achievement, others called him a cheat and said it didn't count due to the crash mats.

I don't feel it's as black and white as it counts or doesn't count. It's not that simple. He did the challenge, and that deserves a hell of a lot of respect. But sticking it without the fail-safe of the crash mat below would no doubt deserve more respect. I'm not saying Arthur wouldn't have had it in him to stick it without the mat. Still, considering that the difficulty of sticking the challenge is hugely down to mentally overcoming the consequence of the drop and reining in power despite the danger, having the mat there undoubtedly made it easier to stick. Reducing the mental element makes controlling the technical element considerably easier. Although nothing changes

objectively with the movement itself, altering how hazardous the surroundings are removes a step in the mental processing of the challenge. The challenge is less mentally demanding because you've reduced the level of consequence. And thus, not coming away with the same mental gains that would have been made in the process of breaking the jump.

It's important to mention that Arthur didn't go there with crash mats intending to stick the cat pass. The crash mats and a trampette were brought to IMAX from the Kinetix Academy in Essex. Sure enough, word spread and suddenly IMAX was brimming with parkourists looking to throw down new stuff at one of the most iconic spots in the world. It looked like a hectic day, with all sorts of unhinged things being sent. Sure enough, the day culminated in an ambulance being called because Callum Manzi front-flipped from the top of IMAX to the bottom, sadly missing the crash mat. Manzi essentially performed a cliff dive onto concrete and narrowly avoided opening his head on one of the walls at the bottom of the stairs. He managed to get away with only a broken ankle, some scrapes, and some pretty gnarly, dark-coloured fracture blisters. So, all in all, an eventful day! But the point is, Arthur and Team Phat didn't set out to stick the iconic cat pass for the first time as a project. It was simply a "it would be rude not to, given the circumstances" kind of decision.

You could argue that Arthur should have done it again to seal the deal, but who knows? By that point, maybe everyone was so gassed that they were already launching themselves from the top of IMAX by that point.

In my opinion, Arthur's stick was legit. It took him three attempts for the stick. It's too black and white to say it didn't count. Still, when Marcio Filipe flew from Porto to London later in 2019 and took over forty attempts to stick it without any assisting equipment, it was undoubtedly more respectable.

Considering the online controversy and the frenzy of diminishing Arthur's achievement, it seems strange that different rules apply to flips. No one learns a triple flyaway onto concrete without progressing through the intermediate stages of various grades of soft

things. If we, as a community, believe in self-reliance, autonomy, and internal processes above all else, then it might make sense to call anyone proficient at flips a fraud. "How dare they not chuck the flip on concrete the first time!?" "Your whole repertoire of flips and every accolade you've ever done doesn't count!" But that would, of course, be insane. So why are we granted aid from assisting equipment in some cases but reviled and condemned in others? Especially if we consider our practice and progression to be entirely personal. Why is Arthur Franks' cat pass precision stick at IMAX any of your business? If we prioritise safety, are we not free to use whatever safety precautions we deem necessary? The level-playing field thing doesn't matter unless we're in a structured parkour competition with rules and regulations, does it? We're not competing and comparing when training on the streets with friends, are we? We're not competing with or measuring ourselves against anyone else when posting our clips online, are we? ...Are we?!

So we have a few somewhat arbitrary dos and don'ts, and I think we'll likely run into more of them in the future. But no matter what, we're all victims of the contradicting dogmas and stigmas of our culture that our short history has laid down. Above are just a few examples. They are just the finer details amid a sea of catch-22s and dogmatic ideas. Now, let's turn our gaze toward one of the core hang-ups of parkour's age-old identity crisis.

Chapter 3 - A to B, or not A to B

> *"If you want to know if what you are doing is parkour, ask yourself if it would help you in an emergency situation, an escape, chase or rescue."* -David Belle

We'll now draw attention to the meatier points of the definition, which inevitably require deeper dissection. Specifically, the "one point to another" and the "fastest and most efficient way possible" parts.

Rage Froobling

Teige Matthews-Palmer (aka Teghead) is originally from Aldershot, UK. On the 3rd of November 2008, Teige released a video called *Rage Froobling*, wherein the description of the video he stated, "It has recently come to my attention that parkour is lame as hell. With this in mind, I have decided to begin practising a new activity called Rage-froobling."

What he was doing in the video (with a guest appearance from Toby Segar, who, back then, was practically Teige's little white-wife-beater-wearing protégé) was as close as possible to the Wikipedia definition of parkour, and the fact that he was claiming it was something new and independent of parkour definitely ruffled some feathers. The video featured fast, desperate-looking runs covering large distances, utilising whatever movement was necessary to overcome the obstacles, rather than bog-standard cookie-cutter moves like lazy and dash vault. It was clear he didn't care how the movement looked; what mattered was that it was fast and purposefully direct. How he got to *B* wasn't important, so long as he got there as fast as he could.

Rage Froobling also featured one-on-one chases, some runs in rural landscapes, as well as at the end of the video, Teige and Leo Westland (whom Sacha and I began training with) fought to be the

first to get to the top of a 10ft wall; each was trying desperately to climb up, while the other fights to pry them down so they can try, only to be wrenched down too. Kieran Owen (AKA Jimmy The Giant, parkour's ex-Louis Theroux) made a video about Rage Froobling. But he only really highlighted the combative/wrestling side, even though there was only one wrestling clip at the end of Teige's video. The rest was primarily long, rapid A-to-B parkour runs. Every clip of Rage Froobling had an element of desperation, and there wasn't one clip with a singular move or challenge, and certainly no flips or precisions being stuck.

Most people loved it and found it refreshing to see such fast-paced and purely efficient sequences, arguably unlike any recorded before. Still, some people were outright offended that he dared to claim this was an entirely new activity. In the comments, he replied to people who were craving a definition for this so-called new sport, saying:

> "Froobling equates to a training method focusing on purposeful displacement, total conviction under pressure, and both the physical ability and mental quickness + strength to control as well as is possible, the outcome of a critical situation."

The cheeky shit was just describing what they understood to be the definition of parkour! And you should have seen the comments. There were dweebs saying stuff like, "But this is just parkour! This is nothing new!" They were upset that the nasty man had the audacity to claim he was doing REAL parkour, implying that what everyone else was doing was not. This inadvertently made some feel insecure—as if the original French founders would look upon them and their impurities with disdain.

Although this was how Teige liked to move, the video was indeed provocative satire: a social commentary on how vastly differently people train, relative to the generally understood definition and the goal many deluded themselves into believing they were training for. There was an idea that training revolved around one day using their skills to reach or escape, or to help someone in

emergencies. One of the dominant philosophies was "be strong to be useful". At the time, for many people sold on this philosophy, their whole practice revolved solely around improving single movements, whether vaults, standing and running precisions, or various vault-to-precision combinations. It was a very short distance if people were training for efficiency from A to B. It was rarely efficient because it focused on difficulty and finesse rather than its potential for real-world reach or escape scenarios. Ultimately, it was all challenge-based movement, with the righteous delusion that the intention was practical and might someday help them save someone or themselves from a dire situation. Teige's video was a statement to say, "If you intend to be useful, your training sucks."

In that period, the closest parkourists around London got to training for efficiency was playing *Manhunt* in 2010. Glimpses of this can be seen in Giles Campbell Longley's video titled *Fun and Games*. We quickly learned that most of the techniques we had spent time practising were useless. Not to mention, we were all horrendously aerobically unfit.

Parkour, Literally

A series of videos worth mentioning, that made similar commentary on how parkour was practised at the time, were simply titled *Parkour, literally*. The first of which was released in May 2010. They were produced by Naïm (AKA L'1consolable) and featured a very skilled athlete named Quentin Levietnamienvolant. The videos were intended to show parkour as it is defined. The intro even featured Wikipedia's definition at the time, which, in effect, doesn't differ much from the current one, apart from the addition of asserting that it is a "non-competitive physical discipline".

It was a great video enjoyed by many, including myself. It made its point reasonably well by letting the rapid yet aesthetically pleasing movement speak for itself.

However, one could argue that many obstacles in the runs could have been easily bypassed by simply running around them. If there's anything my days playing Manhunt in London taught me, it's

not to spend valuable energy and time going over something when you can run around it. It is a bit of a no-brainer in high-stakes situations where time and energy are crucial. This was the crucial difference between Naïm and Quentin's *Parkour, Literally* series and Teige's *Rage Froobling*: One was picking a route or pursuing or evading, and doing whatever was necessary to complete the route, catch or escape as fast as possible; a movement that looked like a desperate animal moving with intent. Whereas, in *Parkour, Literally*, Quentin seemed to put obstacles in his route purposefully. The techniques were classic, standardised, and established named moves. The movements were conventional, polished, and rehearsed, with many parts where the chosen movements were entirely unnecessary. For example, doing hard jumps and 180s from arm jumps when there was the option of saving energy and time by staying in contact with the ground. There were times when he would pointlessly dive cat pass or dive roll up small sets of stairs, whereas, in the clips just before, he just ran up similar sets. There were a fair few unnecessary energy-sapping and time-wasting climb-ups from arm jumps that didn't need to happen, as well as random cat pass precisions where the route didn't demand it. If we put it in the context of a speed competition or an actual emergency scenario, the choices of moves would be far different; therefore, it can't "literally" be parkour according to the claustrophobic definition they claimed to be portraying.

This may seem overly nitpicky – and it 100% is – but the video series's purpose was to make a bold statement that this is *true* parkour according to the definition, without all the bells and whistles trappings of, you know... doing what is fun regardless of any ulterior purpose. I get that it's hard to find long-line locations with no alternative routes other than putting obstacles in the path, so you use more parkour techniques to make the video entertaining. The fact remains that if the environment doesn't require overcoming obstacles, and the techniques used on them are with any fragment of stylistic intention, the movement can only be viewed as stylised rather than strictly for utility. None of this is to say that it was a bad video or that the movement wasn't up to scratch. Quentin moves beautifully, and

I've always been captivated by long lines over pretty spots. People still enjoy the video today for the nostalgic style. But again, it is a style.

I am most certainly nitpicking, but when people make elitist claims about training parkour the correct way, as if to say that everyone else is therefore sacrilegious, it is somewhat satisfying to pick out the nits and show them to their faces. They're just like the rest of us; behind all their A-to-B dogma they subscribe to, they just want to move in a way that is challenging, enjoyable and looks good. And this was further proven a few years later.

Parkour, Imaginatively (Just Don't Go Upside Down!)

In 2013, Naïm released another video that is arguably more iconic for inspiring a new parkour trend. This one was called *Parkour, Imaginatively,* and it featured many movement visionaries from France, Germany, and Finland (including a standout character rarely heard of before—Endijs Mischenko). The video showcased brilliant physical and technical skills, along with ideas of wacky inventiveness, sometimes using only the bare minimum of obstacles but utilising architecture in incredibly fresh and interesting ways. This video (as well as a German video released a few months prior, called *DüDieDinosaurier*) was insanely inspirational, and the technical and imaginative style that it showcased spread like wildfire. The video inspired parkourists to view their environment in a new way. In an episode of *The Cube Cast*, Luke Albrecht says his training style took a complete 180 after seeing the video, putting him on the path to the immensely creative and technical style he has today. Even a short section of my 2013 video was heavily influenced by it. The movement in *Parkour, Imaginatively* was creative for its technical foot placements, awkward swings, threading through odd, tight spaces, and crimpy climbing challenges. However, there were never any flips or spins. So it seemed Naïm saw parkour *literally* as covering space from A to B with quick, efficient movement, yet, in the same breath, still called this new video parkour, despite the moves covering space in a wildly impractical, arbitrarily challenging way, including numerous detours and doubling back on themselves. Again, it was

stylised and challenge-based. So, in their minds, was it still parkour just so long as nobody did flips or spins? For them, was parkour just doing arbitrary, difficult things in a space, so long as no one goes upside down or spins beyond 180 degrees?

I know what you're thinking. We're now pressing dangerously close to the old parkour vs freerunning chestnut. All in good time.

Although how people train today differs greatly from 2008, 2010, and 2013, many still perform single moves with a focus on sticking the landing. The scale of fundamentals is increasingly being pushed, along with the scale and difficulty of flips and longer lines. But rather than A to B, the lines seem to involve many other letters of the alphabet as detours and pit stops, forming a sporadic and unpredictable direction-changing route, while incorporating a considerable amount of different flips and spins, among other disorienting movements that wouldn't make sense if utility were the goal. The intention behind everyone's practice seems far removed from its definition. And yet we still claim to be doing parkour, despite what it looks like and the clear intention being so dramatically at odds with this lazy definition. We'll return to the A-to-B problem in due time, but until then, allow me a tangent to lay more groundwork for what's to come.

Chapter 4 - The Sport That Borrows

When defining parkour, it can be easy to seek solace by drawing comparisons to pre-existing activities. Many may believe that we're a new sport simply borrowing from other practices. Alternatively, a less common perspective is that parkour simply can't be a sport because much of its comprising movement is inherent in human nature and has been a part of us since breaking off from our distant arboreal anthropoid ancestors. It can be pretty tricky for people in the media and the public (not to mention ourselves) to define and communicate parkour without drawing comparisons to other sports and practices. Parkour may be compared to many things, which is understandable given the variety of ways it can be practised. With the broadness and malleability of what we do, it's only natural that there will be many overlaps with other practices.

Urban Ballet

The funniest comparison I've heard from reporters and TV hosts in numerous televised media pieces is "a sort of urban ballet". This is a hilarious take, considering the video clips alongside this description were always groups of men plodding about doing sketchy vaults and filthy height drops.

Throughout the years, elements of dance have been incorporated. Recently, Matt McCreary, Chloe Reynolds, Elias Zimakoff, and Charles Auguste, among others, have drawn inspiration from contemporary dance and performance art, applying it to strange and often minimal spaces. The four of them interact with spaces overlooked by most parkourists, moving in an almost hypnotic and dramatic way, often keeling back and forth as if drunk. One of Charles Auguste's videos received comments saying "fenti parkour", referring to fentanyl. In a short collaborative piece with *Contemporary100*, Matt McCreary states, "Lighting, texture, weather or an unusual sensation the space gives shapes the work I create. I want to play with

the oddities of what makes the space peculiar. It's a whimsical, moody gesture to the places that inspire me."

This may be parkour at an abstract and avant-garde tangent, although borrowing from dance isn't new. Oleg Vorslav from Latvia, in the game-changing 2009 video *Out of Time,* inspired a wave of integration of dance elements. Let's not forget Timothy 'Livewire' Shieff and his incorporation of breakdancing into his movement. With his breakdancing background, he could put windmills and different moves into various terrains. But let's be honest, it was mostly windmills.

There have been many choreographed parkour performances to music. Most have been lousy. For example, practically every ___'s *Got Talent* audition. A good example featuring dance is the *Gerlev Performance Team* from Denmark, which many Danish community household names have passed through over the years. As far back as 2005, Urban Playground from Brighton are another group that toured with the world's first purpose-built mobile parkour structure. Interestingly, in 2008, the team gained two of parkour's founders, Malik Diouf and Charles Perrière. Both examples mixed contemporary dance with parkour to music.

The handful of people rhythmically twirling about is too little to consider parkour a form of dance. Despite parkour's free and expressive nature, often practised with a heavy emphasis on aesthetics, artistic style, and expression, only a tiny arm of the practice can be closely compared to dance. Dance is more defined by moving to music. With parkour, we are far less reliant on that as a defining feature. Still, I look forward to how continuing to borrow from dance and performance art will shape parkour in the future. Perhaps you'll agree that the main thing tying these styles to parkour is their interaction with obstacles.

Climbing

Rock climbing and bouldering involve interacting with obstacles, albeit vertical ones. Climbers use natural features or expensive,

textured, colourful plastic moulds to create arbitrary ways of challenging themselves. Rather than being multidirectional, their sport naturally focuses on going up and along. When Storror went to Fontainebleau to try our luck at the infamous R*ainbow Rocket* dyno, parkourist and climber Oliver Thorpe got nail-bitingly close to making the dyno as a descent. He used the classic descent technique seen in parkour, dropping from the top overhang, attempting to post his hands in the narrow starting hold. Some Czech climbing nerds we met confirmed that it had never been done and was most likely never even considered.

Despite climbing culture 404ing on the concept of *down*, in recent years indoor and competition bouldering have unintentionally borrowed parkour-esque route-setting styles, which have come to be nicknamed *"parkour slab"*. It's generally more dynamic routes using the legs. This kind of route setting has even been seen at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and is weeding out many older climbers who have been slow to adapt to the change. And likely don't have the knees for it anyway. Some go so far as to vehemently detest parkour slab routes making their way into bouldering gyms. Climber Matt Samet expresses his disdain in the long ranting article, *PARKOUR IS NOT CLIMBING, END OF STORY*:

> "The trend has been noted, especially by us crusters who just want our gyms to have a good, high-density array of crimp and resistance problems, but instead find ourselves rock-blocked by greasy, sloping, comp-style/parkour/coordination/Instagram-friendly problems on massive volumes that take up 100 T-nut holes where you could put five good problems instead of one shitty problem because somehow this is all supposed to be fun (it isn't), and the bright, shiny, color-matching blobs are supposed to attract new customers or grow the sport or something, even though everyone I know who's been climbing for ten years or more seems to hate them with a passion and avoids this style—which has little to no crossover with real rock climbing. If slow, controlled climbing movement is the flour used to make the bread of climbing—the

staple food we should be eating—then all this parkour and training content is a pretty plate of doughnuts: nice to look at, photographs well for the Gram, and goes down easily, but in the end is just so many empty calories."

It gives me a sigh of relief seeing that other sports can be just as gatekeepy as parkour. Unlike other practices we've borrowed from, climbing has always gone hand in hand with parkour and has never faced pushback.

Parkourists have always made side quests into the climbing world. Whenever they do, they return to parkour with fresh eyes, using the techniques and strength gained to see new opportunities in the environment. Not just for climbs in the street, but also for finding niche little holds to combine with dynamic movement. It can be revolutionary for some to broaden their scope by taking up climbing as a rainy-day hobby. After Toby Segar spent time crack climbing with Pete Whittaker and Tom Randall in their dodgy crack basement, he started seeking out cracks in the street to climb or do big cat pass to arm jumps, where he jams his hands into little pockets between bricks.

Climbing was always going to be a key element in parkour. Not only as a means to get onto roofs or high places, but as a sport involving fast movement over any landscape, some landscapes require you to go up. The fast ascents from Tom Coppola, Teige Matthews-Palmer, Shane Griffin, Joshua Burnett-Blake, Toby Segar, Darryl Stingley, Moumen "Momo" Machlah and Oliver Thorpe all require dynamic climbing techniques. For climbers, unless you're speed climbing the same wall repeatedly or trying to smash big wall speed run records, there isn't ever the need to slash time off how fast you complete a climb—it's more about maximising the difficulty of strength and technique, and progressing to higher grades.

However, boldness and risk have always been a third layer in increasing difficulty. Free soloing, bouldering highballs, or trad climbing all increase the mental demands by raising the level of consequence and reducing the amount of protection. Trad climbers scale high rock faces, placing removable gear like cams and chocks

into cracks, which may ping out if loaded with a fall. The lead climber places the gear, and the second climber removes it as they continue their ascent. Highball boulders are simply bouldering, but to a higher top-out point. They will still use bouldering pads below, but offer less guaranteed protection the higher you fall. As many will know, free soloing is climbing large rock faces without any protection whatsoever. Compared with most bouldering and sport climbing (roped into solid and reliable permanent bolts), these forms of climbing have far higher risks and consequences. The climbing community places a high value on boldness and mental demands, even attempting to create grading systems that account for these factors. Both parkour and climbing share these values, but I'm glad we've so far avoided obsessively trying to measure everything objectively with subjective grading systems.

There is another niche urban offshoot from bouldering and rock climbing called buildering. As the name might suggest, it's bouldering but on buildings, or any urban architectural structure. Although the climbing community generally has mixed feelings about the purity of buildering, or at least many shrug it off as uncool. The same feelings seem to apply to tree climbing, but strangely not to ice climbing. Perhaps their preference and discrimination stem from climbing's historical roots in alpinism. Trees and urban spaces are not widely accepted because they diverge from alpinism, yet an air-conditioned room with plastic holds drilled into wooden panels above sponge mats gets a thumbs-up.

Even though buildering was developed from bouldering, there are records of people climbing buildings as early as 1895 at Cambridge University, also, later in the 1930s, with the more commonly known antics of *Whipplesnaith* and his unruly band of student reprobates. One of Whipplesnaith's books even depicts roof gaps. They didn't have climbing shoes or elaborate gear; they simply tied a rope around their waist in case they fell.

Aside from the bigger scale climbs with cumbersome safety gear, there are forms of buildering much closer to bouldering. They tackle hard and technical little climbing problems getting from one point to another, sometimes from sit-starts (butt on the ground),

going around columns, often at snail pace, but occasionally with dynos. This style of practice was even seen in parkour by a few, notably Bobby Gordon-Smith and Ryan Ford, as early as 2008. In Ryan's video, *Solving a problem,* the goal was "to discover, create, and solve a unique problem that requires moving over, under, through, and/or around an obstacle or series of obstacles. The more imaginative the problem is, the better."

This definitely falls under the umbrella of both parkour and climbing. Buildering works well as parkour, especially as it requires creatively utilising such minute parts of urban areas. Sometimes the tiniest detail of a climb makes it interesting, requiring a different type of creativity and *parkour vision* to see or complete a challenge. I would consider it a strange offshoot, like many others, where the lines are blurred. Buildering seems to be situated at the intersection of climbing and parkour. Their lack of equipment and the environment in which they most commonly occur are the same. We may borrow climbing techniques, intentionally or unintentionally, for a challenge or a line, but if it fits, it sits.

Martial Arts

Techniques from capoeira and tricking indeed comprise the anatomy of many parkourist styles. Although it is not technically a martial art, it was developed by borrowing moves from taekwondo, wushu, kung fu, sport karate, and capoeira. In the mid-1960s, some of these martial arts saw an increasing emphasis on flashy flying kicks, spins and flips. Tricking supposedly developed through lighthearted one-upmanship after tournaments. Eventually, communities emerged with a sole focus on flashy moves and began bombarding gymnastics open sessions everywhere for their sprung floor—just as we did.

In the 2000s, as more people gained access to the internet, both the tricking and parkour communities evolved alongside each other. But since it's a sport taking place solely on flat ground, they couldn't take a great deal from us. Conversely, we mined their videos for any gold that could be hucked off a 6-foot ledge. Many of us pored over videos of Anis Cheurfa, Vellu Saarela and Michael Guthrie, but

none of us came close to their level. Now parkourists are taking tricking fundamentals and throwing them over roof gaps, onto walls, and even over rails. Or lazily adding a cork or cart full to the end of a boring line because some of us think it adds a bit of spice…

Despite the apparent trait that most martial arts are leaning a fair bit heavier on the *fight* side rather than the *flight* side, the two are still commonly compared, especially as the comparison to ninjas is practically inescapable for members of the public.

Ninjas are said to have practised elements of displacement for escape, as well as to avoid detection. The classically romanticised ninja is often imagined to perform parkour-like feats, climbing walls and jumping onto rooftops to infiltrate territories. The ninja's espionage skills became known collectively as the martial art *ninjutsu.* Ninjutsu classes worldwide still involve elements of practical movement, but they are pretty limited and far from the main focus. It can be exciting to imagine that there were some real-life ninjas training and performing wild stuff five hundred years ago. However, it was more likely pretty lacklustre compared to today's parkour standards. We prioritise being proficient movers without dividing time and energy learning combat, stealth, and other archaic training methods. But who knows? Maybe the Manpower gap and cat pass front at IMAX was child's play to the ninjas of old. There are cute videos of "real" ninjas in Japan who are still training in line with the old ways. From what I saw, their movement skills are tame compared to ours. Whether old-school ninjas matched or surpassed us, their romanticised image in fiction has been iconic and inspirational for many doing parkour. Even a handful of the founders were featured in Luc Besson's film *Taxi 2*, performing parkour dressed as ninjas in 2000.

Undoubtedly, being able to do stuff like a ninja has long been a big motivator for nerdy kids everywhere to start doing parkour. This is also a big reason why there are thousands of parkour videos on YouTube with nerds dressed up as ninjas attempting to pander to a large, young and starry-eyed demographic. Some may remember Xin Sarith Wuku's 2005 video titled *Urban Ninja*. This video was many people's first exposure to parkour, being among the

first wave of parkour videos on YouTube and undoubtedly helping many people start training.

People have argued that Jackie Chan is the real father of parkour because of the parkour-esque stunts in many of his movies. His iconic fight-scene choreography, along with his frantic reach-and-escape scenes, often make use of the surrounding environment, which, in essence, is what we'd call parkour. There are many scenes where he uses recognisable parkour techniques. Despite Jackie Chan's undeniable influence on parkour's founders, the training method they developed remains vastly different from how movement is used in stunt work for movie scenes. In its purely physical sense, we can say that Jackie Chan was doing parkour, and in the same way, we can say that the climbing, jumping, and random daring stuff that kids and teenagers do is also technically parkour. We must clearly distinguish between parkour as a practice and its associated movements.

In an article called *Parkour Specifically*, René Scavington wrote, "Some guy isn't doing parkour just because he jumped down some stairs, and I'm not playing soccer just because I kicked a ball."

Jackie Chan was an essential inspiration and an action icon, but claiming he is unwittingly the founder of parkour is a little far-fetched.

It's hard to ignore the influence of martial arts on the mindset of parkour's founders. Most of whom also had backgrounds in different martial arts. They often practised combat elements in training. It fits into their original ethos of being a *homme fort* (strong man). David Belle also stated in an old interview with *La Haine* director, Mathieu Kassovitz, "Parkour is a method of training in the physical preparation of obstacles. It's a martial art in philosophy."

Overall, we've borrowed chiefly from what's on the periphery of martial arts. Most prominently, Bruce Lee's philosophy, Tao of Jeet Kune Do, made the biggest impression on parkour's founders. Although it's much harder to measure how much of this has trickled down to be subconsciously internalised by parkourists today —at least a hell of a lot harder to measure than the macacoes and corks we've borrowed.

Wheel-based Middlemen

Another common comparison is other urban lifestyle sports, such as skateboarding, rollerblading and BMX. (Not scootering! Let's not go that low.) We share many characteristics; we all work to overcome fear and reappropriate our environment beyond its intended purpose. Anyone claiming parkour to be a revolutionary, unique sport because it subverts the urban landscape is wilfully turning a blind eye to these sports. The obvious difference is that we aren't using any external apparatus. Ours is a complete hands-on experience with the environment we're using. There's no wheel-based middleman between us and the urban furniture. You could even go so far as to view parkour as the hobby-horsing of skateboarding, rollerblading, or BMX. I've often wondered whether skaters see parkour as LARPing their sport without the board. It would be a hard case to make that we borrowed the whole idea of using the environment from pre-existing urban sports, as there are no signs that the founders were influenced by them. Although parkour and other urban sports have no direct connection in their origins, many who started parkour in the 2000s transitioned from other urban lifestyle sports. Our obsession with naming different moves and tricks with wacky names in that era says much about this influence. We'd name vaults King Kong, monkey, speed, reverse, thief and dash, whereas the French before this era simply labelled most vaults as *passement*. Or even simpler, the Yamakasi used noises to describe a movement or a route. "Pim pam tic tac and this way." The terminology came later. It would undoubtedly be far more interesting if this trend continued and more complex moves emerged. Imagine describing a screwdriver kong gainer full with onomatopoeic words and sounds! This trick-based mindset also led many early adopters to train as if they were ticking off moves and tricks on a checklist, placing less focus on where and how they do them.

Skateboarding is a sport with a long and rich history. There's no doubt now that it's the most culturally accepted and widespread street sport. Since the early 2000s, with the release of the Tony Hawk video game franchise, skateboarding has become an increasingly prominent

feature of street culture and fashion. However, it wasn't always this way. In the 80s, Tony Hawk hid his skateboard in the bushes before school and picked it up after. He didn't want to be seen with his board out of fear of getting bullied. In the UK in the early 2000s, embracing skate culture made you an outcast at school, with names like crusty, grebo, grunger, or emo being thrown at you. But since then, skating has become inescapable.

Skateboarding culture has penetrated the mainstream. Sacha remembers a change in the tides from when he was blasted with all the aforementioned derogatory terms, and then, as if overnight, these bullies had copped themselves a skateboard and saw Sacha as some kind of phenom because he could kickflip. Soon after, everyone and their mother donned a pair of Vans shoes and a Thrasher hoodie, often without even the foggiest idea that they were skate brands. With new films like *Mid90s* and *North Hollywood*, and an increasing number of celebrities lapping up its fashion and culture, its popularity has only quickened in pace.

As mentioned earlier, the parkour community once hated being associated with extreme sports because we arrogantly viewed ourselves as philosophically superior to them. "We aren't adrenaline junkies! Everything we do is disciplined, calculated and safe! What we do holds a higher altruistic purpose! Be strong to be useful, bro!!"

As time went on, we've fortunately ditched this silly idea of outright disassociation, and some go even further as to look up to skate culture as somewhat of an older brother to ours. One that's wiser and has already passed its teething problems. Some try to emulate skate fashion and the way skaters create their videos to be cool and garner a broader appeal. Many of us are naively trying to follow in their footsteps as if it were easy to reach their current cultural status. We borrow many good things from other lifestyle sports, but emulating a pre-existing entity to a tee may not be the most efficient route towards our goals. As a sport and a community, we have solid potential to foster genuine, authentic originality. However, past attempts have been pretty dire, futile, and embarrassing stains on our history. Even today, we still have to work extra hard to undo the fallout. Many will blame *The Office* and its

2009 *Hardcore Parkour* skit for tarnishing parkour's reputation in the public eye. I argue that it was self-inflicted. It's more likely that our lameness inspired the *Hardcore Parkour* skit rather than the skit making parkour lame. Don't go blaming Steve Carell and Rainn Wilson! As far as fashion is concerned, almost anything is an upgrade from the combo of tatty, brightly coloured, extra baggy joggers coupled with Decathlon's own-brand £9.95 running shoes decorated with permanent markers.

Undoubtedly, we've borrowed a lot from pre-existing urban sports, but some might argue not quite as much as we have from...

Gymnastics

Already, a few of you may be seething internally at the premise that we've borrowed from or have anything to do with gymnastics. I've been guilty before of replying to an inquisitive person in the street, explaining, "Parkour is pretty much gymnastics but on the street", purely for brevity, impatiently wishing to be rid of them so I could carry on training uninterrupted. That didn't save me from throwing up a bit in my mouth after uttering the words.

On the face of it, gymnastics appears to be a close relative. It could be seen as our senile uncle, although twice removed, one we hate bitterly and do our best to avoid making eye contact with at any family gathering, out of fear of them obnoxiously flirting with us. The type of uncle who compliments you on how much you've grown as they place a wrinkled hand on your knee. As with the urban lifestyle sports, appearances are deceiving, and we share no history. As for influence, that is extremely hard to deny. Same with tricking: the overlap in moves is enormous. We've borrowed from a deep well of moves that gymnasts have developed over centuries and applied them to the hard ground rather than crash mats, sprung floors and bendy wooden bars, despite occasionally using them as tools to learn the moves. Not only have we borrowed the moves, but we've built upon them and used them in more ways than gymnastics would allow.

Gymnastics is mastering a prescribed set of techniques on a small handful of very simple standardised and unchanging apparatus—the same regulation bars, beam, rings, sprung floor and vault horses. It involves routinised, cookie-cutter skills performed with a rigid, traditional aesthetic ideal to which gymnasts religiously adhere. Although it has evolved in many ways and skill levels have risen dramatically over the past hundred years, it remains constrained within the traditional walls it has created for itself. Gymnastics is also rife with rules and regulations to abide by. Beyond the need to point toes and wear tight-fitting leotards, they aren't permitted to use the equipment for any purpose beyond its intended use. Gymnastics is notorious for banning moves. Most forbidden moves are so due to safety concerns. One relating to parkour is the prohibition of sideways takeoff and landing, which is how we side-flip in most cases. We can acknowledge that awkward side-flip landings can be more dangerous, but can you imagine banning side-flips from parkour competitions altogether? You can guarantee technical and physical improvements in the future, but innovation will be somewhat predictable given gymnastics' many constraints.

In stark contrast, parkour's future is far less predictable. We lack anything close to simple standardised equipment; we apply movement to increasingly complex environments and complex movements to simple environments. We have no rules for how you take off or land. (Although in a Style competition, you can bet on having your score deducted if you scorpion.) Rather than rigid aesthetic ideals, we celebrate a variety of styles and regularly challenge existing movement norms. We are applying a bottomless well of movement onto an infinite environment. There are staggering innovations every year. You can guarantee new wormholes will keep appearing for parkourists to explore, like off-axis flips, pole slides, chimney slides, inverted tic tacs, splat backflips and moves that make no sense even to name. Every emerging movement trend can be applied to any environment you can fit it into. And then there's also combining them. Joe Scandrett keeps surprising us all, not only with the scale at which he's pushing pole slides but also with the various grotesque ways he enters them. When you compare this to how stifling and claustrophobic gymnastics is, in many cases, parkour

needs only to exist to convert teenage gymnasts over to the side of light and freedom.

I argue that gymnastics' distinct lack of freedom, due to its traditional aesthetic standards, rules, regulations, and separate disciplines, each confined to minimal standardised equipment, is the definitive difference between the two sports. It should go without saying that I see what we have with parkour right now as very special. However, I see it as vital that we bear this clear distinction in mind to keep parkour off the tracks, which could lead to something akin to gymnastics—a stifling, predictable, codified dead end.

With that in mind, I'd like to point out that parkour's most common definition also doesn't allow much wiggle room for freedom.

Malleability

In the past, René Scavington and Tom Coppola have presented a mental image of a point in the middle of a circle representing traditional parkour, defined by the A-to-B movement for practical utility without unnecessary aesthetic embellishment, and the outer circle represents the ever-expanding umbrella of what parkour is and can evolve into. Close to the centre point, you can imagine sticks and meandering flow lines where the route doubles back on itself or darts from point to point rather than a clearly defined route; anything that, although it may not seem specifically from A to B, in training, it may still lend itself to better equipping you for that goal. Then, further out of the circle may be most flips, spins, and anything else with stylistic intent or to make things arbitrarily more challenging and complex (as in the video *Parkour Imaginatively*), a further separation from strict practical use. The further you go from the centre point, the more avant-garde, expressive, and dance-like the styles become.

Another angle to consider with this mental image is where the movement occurs, and whether training indoors, on purpose-built structures surrounded by soft surfaces, dilutes traditional parkour. It would depend on each individual's perspective, where specific examples will fall on the spectrum, or whether they are entirely outside the circle.

This presents a problem for where the lines of parkour turn into climbing or gymnastics. If you view parkour so broadly as moving with the environment, you could logically argue that climbing and gymnastics are sub-sports of parkour. But maybe, realistically, whenever there's an overlap, you know when it diverges when you see it. It would be odd to call a crimpy 7b+ boulder problem in Fontainebleau parkour, as it would be calling Simone Biles' uneven bars routine at the Paris 2024 Olympics parkour. It would be strange to dub a pole dancer's routine a parkour line. With clear examples such as these, there certainly is a line. Parkour can't be a catch-all term, reaching out and enveloping entire movement practices like a parasitic black hole. Although there is a line, it's perhaps best kept blurred, and we should be open to the rich broadness that parkour can encompass.

Considering how the amount of freedom in parkour creates such a diverse and ambiguous sport, it's no wonder we've borrowed so much from elsewhere. Dance, action sports, martial arts, climbing, tricking, gymnastics, and many others are our smorgasbords to sample and develop. We fill up our plates and make parkour richer year after year.

However, its broadness and the ambiguity that comes with it are ultimately why the current definition has been passively accepted by so many for so long. Because it's challenging to conjure up a fitting new one that houses it all. Defining broad things is a challenging thing to do.

Chapter 5 - Late to the Party

You, like me, have likely wondered why parkour didn't emerge as a practice earlier. How did more abstract street sports like skateboarding, rollerblading and BMX arise before something as straightforward as parkour? Aside from our environment-using close cousins, perhaps a bigger question is, how did golf, cricket, ice hockey, lacrosse and curling predate parkour? Parkour does seem too obvious a thing to miss. How was the low-hanging fruit practice of improving your body's ability to move in a space overlooked until so recently? The movements have always been available to us; the only necessary implement is our body. We didn't have to wait for some wheeled contraption to be invented. Maybe the best we can do is guess, but I have some ideas.

To Exercise Naked

It might have something to do with a pre-existing activity, rooted in improving your body's ability to move with obstacles, that long predates parkour. It's an activity that can be traced back to ancient Greece, particularly Sparta and Athens. Yes, that old.

Historical records suggest this activity evolved from people jumping over bulls as a simple demonstration of one-upmanship. This spread to many major cities of Ancient Greece as a spectacle and later incorporated other random tests of physical prowess, such as tightrope walking, branch swinging, and crude forms of tumbling. An early documenter of this exercise, Philostratus, waxed philosophical about it (as the Greeks did), claiming it's a form of wisdom comparable to philosophy, poetry, music, geometry, and astronomy. Records from Plato, Aristotle, and Homer describe the practice's benefits, and they often prefaced philosophical discussions and lectures with training. They considered the activity a discipline that combined the education of the body and the mind.

The activity became more formalised after the Romans conquered Greece in 146 BCE. It was adopted to train men for war because the activity helped them jump, mount, and dismount horses.

What sport could this be, you ask? I failed to mention a key point. Whilst they trained, they wouldn't wear any clothes, which led people to refer to the activity as, what translates to *'to exercise naked'*, otherwise *'gymnos'* or *'gymnazo'*.

I'll give you a second for the penny to drop if it hasn't already...

You guessed it, it's gymnastics! So our prim and proper, tradition-obsessed, pointed-toed uncle, gymnastics, has survived for a couple of millennia. Although it's had some dramatic makeovers, facelifts and tummy-tucks throughout its history, it's served as a practice of moving the human body for utility, a show of athleticism and aesthetics, and, supposedly, a form of wisdom. And then, as we've seen, it somewhat devolved, becoming codified and reduced to its segmented disciplines, each with its standardised apparatus. But of course, we know that gymnastics wasn't the only thing that provided a yardstick for the movement and athletic potential of the human body.

Codified Dead-ends

There is, of course, athletics. Going back again to ancient Greece and the ancient Olympic Games. The first Olympic Games, as historically recorded, were held at Olympia in the southern Greek city-state of Elis in 776 BCE. They hosted various events that pitted people against each other, which were said to be partly to honour some guy called Zeus. Although perhaps more a semi-barbaric leap-yearly dick-measuring spectacle for the appeasement of the sadistic archons, kings and tyrants. The games were banned in 393 CE by the Christian emperor Theodosius I, who outlawed pagan celebrations and festivals. This must have upset much of the Greek population, as the games were so widely adored that even political upheavals and wars between city-states were put on hold in their name.

The early games involved only running races, but later included many other events, such as long jumps. It's said they did a standing broad jump instead of today's running long jump. They also held 1-2kg stone weights in each of their hands, called halters, to jump further and land more steadily. It's also theorised that due to the 15m length of their sandpits, it wasn't just the single broad jump but five consecutive two-footed plyos from standing. They included discus, shot put, javelin, chariot racing, mule racing, wrestling, boxing and another kind of hand-to-hand combat called pankration, which seems like a brutal mixture of the latter two. Imagine UFC, but only biting and eye gouging were off the cards. Again, all competitors were butt naked, which must have made pankration even more brutal, considering the easy target on display if the eyes were off the menu. This also could have had something to do with why married women were strictly forbidden from watching the games, with the penalty of being caught on the grounds being death.

When the Roman Emperor Theodosius I abruptly ended the games in 394 CE, he also ended widely admired, high-level athletic pursuits, including gymnastics, given the number of events grouped under the umbrella of gymnastics at the time. As the games were stamped out, so was gymnastics' progress. Its use was then relegated exclusively to military training, but that, too, ended abruptly with the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE. Still, within a military context, I see no reason to assume it would have progressed beyond the dead end of effectively mounting a horse.

Throughout the Dark Ages and the Renaissance, a handful of gymnastics-related movements survived in small pockets among travelling thespians, acrobats, dancers, and jugglers, which would go on to form circus culture. Historians credit Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work on education in the mid-1700s with sparking a shift in physical education for European children by combining cognitive and physical education. These physical education reforms inspired Germany's Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths and his influential 1793 book, *Gymnastics For Youth*, in which he outlined two divisions of gymnastics: natural and artificial. These can be differentiated as utilitarian and non-utilitarian: one focuses on the body's health and functional use, while the other emphasises beauty,

much like our primitive, separatist ideas of parkour and freerunning. Sweden's Per Henrik Ling was the leading developer of the utilitarian side and, in 1813, founded the Royal Gymnastics Central Institute in Stockholm. This route would go on to form callisthenics, whereas another German, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, is credited with the rapid spread of gymnastics, which is closer to that of today. His system of gymnastics, called *turnen*, was originally practised in an open field and involved a variety of physical games, races, tests of strength and courage, as well as various gymnastic movements inspired by the work of GutsMuths.

Modern gymnastics competitions can be traced to Jahn's outdoor apparatus, *Turnplatz*. Jahn invented many early apparatuses that would be incorporated into the various gymnastics sub-disciplines we see today, except for the tall towers erected to test students' courage. Balance beams, parallel bars, climbing ropes and poles were also found at the Turnplatz. These challenging apparatuses attracted young men, who were then indoctrinated with Jahn's dream of German unification and his ideas on the defence of the fatherland and on ridding Prussia of French influence. Jahn was essentially a nazi before nazism. He coupled his nationalist sentiments with a kind of "be strong to be useful" philosophy, except that, *useful* in their case, was for racially motivated attacks. Sure enough, a young gymnast eventually murdered a German playwright in 1819. Following this, the Prussian king closed down around one hundred gymnastics fields and centres, and Jahn was jailed as a democratic demagogue, then put under house arrest for five years. Three of his close followers fled to North America out of fear of arrest and took gymnastics with them. Gymnastics was an underground sport in Prussia until King Frederick William IV lifted the ban in 1842. I find it hilarious that gymnastics was considered a counter-cultural underground sport for 23 years. Except I wouldn't classify it as a cool one.

After a brief millennium-and-a-half intermission, the Olympics were revived in 1896, led by a Frenchman with a colossal moustache, Pierre de Coubertin. A newly rejuvenated gymnastics was added to the roster, assumed to be free of any violent nationalist tendencies. Despite still being in an early form compared to today, it had come a long way since ancient Greece. And despite much of it looking like

synchronised military-esque routines en masse while wearing pyjamas, the bedrock was laid for what it would evolve into today: a tradition-laden artistic movement practice aimed at maximising physical performance within the constraints of its limited events and apparatus. As with athletics and its segmented sports, which create impressive but predictable measures of human performance, gymnastics was forced into a predictable, codified, dead-end.

So, our ability to jump and move as humans has been built upon for millennia, albeit with some hiccups. It seems only natural that these things occurred as early as this in the history of civilised society, since they all also had bodies. Although it may be hard to imagine, they didn't have smartphones and Netflix to eat up every dull waking moment, so it seems more understandable that they would feel inclined to push their bodies in their spare time, even if it was to outdo other local idiots, prepare for war, honour their fake pagan gods, be an effective nazi, be healthy, or to attain a more holistic wisdom. There's undoubtedly something inherent to humanity that yearns to explore and push into uncharted physical territory.

To answer why nothing like parkour emerged before, we must acknowledge that it did, in a sense. Gymnastics in ancient Greece was a broad practice encompassing and celebrating many forms of movement. Combat, running, jumping, and climbing were all included, but they later became distinct sports after the Olympics were banned. Gymnastics in the 1800s was a broad practice encompassing art, health, and utility, but various ideas applied to it all seemed to lead to the same dead-end pigeonhole, with limited freedom to expand.

I'm not saying that these things were parkour before parkour; I'm saying that they filled a space, quenching a thirst for pushing human movement. The dull, segmented, and codified gymnastics and athletic sports held people's attention and curiosity for movement and our body's capabilities for a long time. The birth of parkour represents a necessary expansion to freedom. Parkour didn't come from gymnastics, but it certainly filled a space that so desperately needed filling.

Chapter 6 - Parkour's Origins

This chapter does not provide a strict timeline of parkour's origins. The aim is to outline key factors which led to parkour's birth. If you'd like a more detailed timeline, I recommend checking out Julie Angel's book, *Breaking The Jump*. Although it is an entertaining read and a dense, detailed resource, there are holes, a tinge of creative license, and a healthy dose of dramatisation here and there. For example, according to the book, the Manpower gap in Évry is supposedly twelve metres across and eight metres down—somewhat of a stretch. Malik Diouf has disclosed to an informant of mine, who shall remain anonymous (Joseph Henderson), that there are scenes featuring Malik that never actually happened. However, let's not get bogged down in the details; it's still the closest thing to a canon we have, despite being very Yamakasi-centric and written in a very novel-esque fashion. Another exceptionally detailed resource is *Parkour History* with Max Henry, hosted on the Height Drop podcast. The show is practically *Dan Carlin's Hardcore History,* but for parkour nerds.

For the record, I'm not the kind of purist who believes everyone needs to know and respect the history. Countless people with parkour at the centre of their world are reaping the numerous rewards without knowing who David Belle is. Whenever I'm referencing parkour history in this book, I'm doing so to provide context, as I believe many of our bullshit arguments stem from a lack of its understanding. We'll first draw our attention to the founders' environment.

Lisses & Évry

In the 1950s, many foreign workers, primarily of francophone African nations, poured into France for work as part of the postwar rebuilding effort. Due to this massive population increase, there was a severe housing crisis in major cities, leading to the urgent need to build many new suburban towns from thin air. A brutalist architectural

aesthetic became prevalent in these newly constructed towns, as it did all over Europe after World War II. Many of these suburbs' aesthetics were predominantly harsh concrete structures with repetitive geometric forms, which can feel bleak, lifeless, imposing and purely utilitarian. Big towering blocks of concrete that seem like overwhelming and ugly filing cabinets for working-class people.

The term brutalism may naturally evoke negative connotations, but the term comes from the French phrase *beton brut*, meaning "raw concrete". Despite negative perceptions of brutalist housing estates due to crime, social immobility, and a sense of urban decay, these areas, when well designed, can encourage social interaction by providing large, open public spaces for community gatherings and events. In other words, brutalist estates can create public enclaves, sheltered from the busy, commercialised high streets. London's Barbican, with its extensive public walkways and plazas, was a perfect example of this before it became privatised and gentrified. It's designed as a massive network of interconnected public spaces enclosed from its loud urban surroundings. You can imagine how the advent of brutalist architecture was significant to the creation of parkour.

There was a long string of severe civil unrest in postwar France due to radical social inequality (which the French, throughout history, can't seem to get enough of). This unrest was compounded in 1968 by widespread demonstrations, strikes, and university occupations that lasted up to seven weeks. France's economy ground to a halt, causing the government to momentarily cease functioning after the then-president, Charles de Gaulle, fled to West Germany in fear. Perhaps he feared the guillotines would make a comeback.

These newly built towns surrounding Paris were designed to protect the city's pleasant, affluent metropolitan areas from the rapid influx of immigrants and people from French colonies. The historical and cultural regions in the heart of Paris would be preserved and gentrified by pushing more working-class folk further afield.

One of these new towns, Évry, sat 25 miles southeast of central Paris. Everything was lumped together: schools below houses and their playgrounds without clear boundaries, seemingly haphazardly

plonked amongst car parks and offices. There were areas designed without any apparent purpose. Julie Angel's book explains how the streets were rife with gang violence. Apparently, Malik Diouf had a friend who was shot and killed. Yann Hnautra was on the receiving end of racial abuse and was regularly involved in street fights. In the book, there's a scene in which Malik and Charles Perrière use parkour to escape a gang of 50 men. (See what I mean about dramatisation? Fifty is pushing it!) A quote from Malik reads, "I can't stop because this is what I like. Instead of doing bad things on the streets, like stealing a bike or a scooter like my other friends did, I preferred to train and do something good with my body."

Sébastien Foucan explains how the neighbouring town, Lisses, is pretty middle-class and chill. Like most places, Lisses and Évry had good and bad areas. In a podcast interview, John 'Hedge' Hall asks Sébastein how much resistance they encountered from people in the streets as they took their training more seriously. Sébastien claims that he'd interact with maybe one person in the space of a year. He says, "I don't know what the police were doing, but we were certainly not the main problem for the police."

He continues, "There was no fence or lock for Dame du Lac. You could spend the whole day there, and no one will come and say anything to you—absolutely nobody. You can climb with no rope, no safety. Nobody is coming to tell you anything."

(For anyone who may not know, the Dame du Lac is a sixty-foot-tall concrete climbing structure you will have seen in photos and videos. If there ever were to be a parkour heritage site, it's Dame Du Lac.)

In an old interview, Kazuma portrays a similar image: "We just wanted to be left alone. We really appreciated the calm of the parks and the forests, and since Lisses looks like a city built in a park, it was perfect! Contrary to popular belief, Parkour does not come from the concrete, grey and dust of cities."

He also says, "Sometimes, no one dared to approach us, and even the police looked at us and preferred to leave us alone. The guys who squatted in the stairwells of the gym to smoke their joints would run away when they saw us jump violently, land and take off again like arrows."

Alternatively, in David Belle's book simply titled *Parkour*, he paints a slightly different picture regarding run-ins with the police:

> "I have had my ID checked a million times—sometimes even several times in one night. And each time, it was the same fuss, like, "*What are you doing here at 3 am? You shouldn't be out here. Gimme your papers*", and so on. And whenever cops had any interest in what we were doing, they just couldn't distinguish youngsters who wanted to do fishy things and youngsters who were training."

These are frustratingly totally contradicting accounts. Or maybe it was simply different for Sébeastien and Kazuma because they weren't out training around the housing estates at three in the morning while people were trying to sleep. The suburbs of Paris at the time may have been an ideal place to do something outside without being stopped or questioned. Or maybe what these lads were doing compared with the higher crime levels at the time didn't seem that bad. The police had bigger fish to fry, and the passerby public had more pressing urban ghouls to be frightened of than lads that seemed more intently focused on jumping about and doing push-ups.

It's hard to conclude from these sharply opposing accounts whether parkour emerged from the conditions in the densely populated banlieues, characterised by neglected social housing and a higher migrant population. Still, either way, I don't consider it a huge factor to get caught up on concerning parkour's origins. The freedom to train uninterrupted seems like a much more critical factor. Imagine parkour emerging from elsewhere, with a poor socioeconomic background, like the projects in the Bronx, New York, rising alongside the hip-hop scene in the early 90s. I doubt they would have had too much freedom to clamber about on rooftops. Let's be honest; they probably would have been shot by police or other residents. Conversely, the boys in Lisses and Évry had free rein of their suburban training ground. Complete freedom to experiment with making the best of their concrete jungle. Given this knowledge of freedom at the tail end of prolonged socio-political upheaval and a harsh cultural context, we might deduce that parkour sprang from the

claustrophobic constraints of social immobility, offering a freedom to appropriate brutalist public spaces as a form of escapism. Maybe... but also, maybe not entirely.

We can be sure that brutalist architecture played a significant role in shaping the movement and provided the landscape for some of their more daring jumps, which served as a spectacle to capture the media's attention. But for creating this phenomenon, we may have naively placed too much weight on the hyper-urban environment as a factor. I feel a few more things were at play, especially considering that a significant amount of its development occurred about thirty miles north in the much older and greener town of Sarcelles, in an even older Ecouen forest. What is often overlooked is the amount of time spent crafting their skills and mentality in the Ecouen forest, amongst the trees, on tall stone walls, on a modest wooden fitness trail, and at a few picnic benches. Not quite the quintessential concrete playground you'd envision. In the 2006 documentary *Generation Yamakasi*, Yann Hnautra says, "The art was born in Évry, and the spirit was born in Sarcelles."

Jeunes de Banlieue

A handful of friends were back and forth between the two Parisian suburbs because the brothers Châu, Williams, and Phung Belle lived in Sarcelles with their family, along with their uncle Raymond Belle, who joined them in 1988. At the time, David Belle had never met his father, Raymond. He had just heard incredible stories from his grandfather about his superhero-like reputation as a firefighter, a military man, and a gymnast. When David was fourteen, he moved to Lisses to live with his mother, which was only an hour's train journey from his father in Sarcelles. After being raised primarily by his grandfather, Gilbert Kitten, in a large manor house in the countryside of Fécamp, Normandy, he leapt at the opportunity to visit his dad now and again in Sarcelles, now that he was much closer. Of course, through these frequent visits, he became good friends with his cousins, Châu, Williams and Phung. David also started bringing a few

of his friends from Lisses. The main squad in Lisses was Laurent Piemontesi, Yann Hnautra, Sébastein Foucan and of course, David Belle. Malik Diouf, Charles Perrière and Guylain N'Guba Boyeke joined later. However, early on, many were joining in with the fun to some extent, including David Malgogne and Frederic Hnautra (Yann's brother). But as time passed and their games intensified, it was whittled down to a core group. Although my conversations with Sébastien Foucan suggest they weren't quite the cohesive group of friends that Angel's book might suggest. Apart from the Belles, the groups from Lisses and Sarcelles didn't spend too much cumulative time training together in the early days.

Their training originally wasn't just jumps, vaults, wall runs, or any of the expected fundamental parkour moves. It wasn't strictly centred on practical, efficient movement; it involved using anything in their environment to test and challenge themselves, becoming stronger in all aspects. In the early and mid-90s, they had no official name for their training yet. At most, some of them would say stuff like, "Let's go and practice some parcours", which is the French word for "course" or "route". They didn't need or want a name. I can imagine it being pretty hard to name what they were doing. It's as if they were training to be like superheroes or warriors, as if in preparation for some undefeatable enemy or zombie apocalypse. In addition to being adept at navigating whatever environment they found themselves in, they subjected their bodies to severe physical strain through torturous exercise and general challenges. Day in and day out, if they weren't jumping, they were working out or practising some form of combat, even punching trees. What inspired these banlieue boys to feel the need to push themselves so hard in every conceivable way?

Idiot Box Influence

Like most of us in our youth, the founders were deeply steeped in their protagonist-heavy fiction on TV. In *Breaking the Jump*, Julie Angel describes Bruce Lee as the unofficial president of their little club. (Although David would likely demand that his father was.) They

latched onto Bruce Lee's Taoist philosophical piffle as holy writ. If he had said something, it must have been so, and they lived their lives accordingly. Even though much of Bruce Lee's *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* philosophy was plagiarised from the Indian philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and almost eerily word-for-word in some cases.

They were enthralled by the trials and tribulations in Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jean-Claude Van Damme's films. Sébastien also speaks of Rambo and Rocky. David writes of Spider-Man and Daredevil comics. The anime Dragon Ball also played a major role in inspiring them. It's easy to imagine how Goku's training and his general altruistic nature shaped the mentality of these young and impressionable men. You can see the infantile influence from anime and martial arts movies in the intro to David Belle's iconic *Speed Air Man* video, where he seems in a trance like state doing some ritualistic gestures and finishes with bringing his arms across his chest as if channelling some inner Qi energy then rapidly drawing his arms apart emphasised by a GCSE-level media studies visual effects burst of light, similar to that of Dragon Ball. In case that's not enough proof that our founders were nerds, try pronouncing David's video title, "*Speed Air Man*," quickly in a French accent. It is no coincidence that it sounds phonetically like Spider-Man. All of the cultural influences above feature stories of transformation and altruism that spurred the young, impressionable founders into action.

However, all this doesn't quite explain it. I'm sure a lot of you, just like me, watched all of these things growing up. I loved every one of the examples mentioned above. The Jackie Chan films were on repeat, the training montages in Van Damme's *Kickboxer* and the Rocky films used to get me hyped, and I watched every single Dragon Ball and Dragon Ball Z episode at least twice. (Although I steered clear of the non-canon garbage that is Dragon Ball GT.)

My point is that you and I were lazy compared to the founders. We weren't catapulted into action, even a fraction of how the founders were. It likely inspired us to watch more similar TV rather than attempt to replicate. Maybe at the very least, after watching The Matrix, we may have tried a nine-step horizontal wall run on a vertical wall, then given up and gone back inside shortly after

realising we couldn't accomplish more than three pathetic stuttered steps. Even if we were also involved in sports (as the founders were), fiction didn't elicit the same prolonged romantic effect as it did for them. They were actively in pursuit of becoming warriors. They were compelled to stick with it. They were driven to sweat, bleed and cry for it. Until somewhere along the line, something recognisable as a distinct practice bubbled up to fruition. So what else was in the melting pot that spurred these boys to consistently hone their craft when everyone else their age was dossing on street corners and getting into all manner of mischief? What else could have been involved in the incubation phase of parkour's birth?

La Méthode Naturelle

We need to head further back in time. Don't worry; it's not Ancient Greece again. The first crucial link in the chain of causation that set in motion the events leading to the founders developing a mindset and practice that evolved into the parkour we know and love today is a Frenchman named Georges Hébert.

Hébert was a naval officer and physical educator, tasked initially with keeping sailors fit within the confines of the ship's deck. While touring South America and the West Indies, he found himself fascinated by the strength and athletic prowess of the indigenous peoples. He stopped off at the famed Attila's Athletic Studio of Physical Culture in New York, a classic old-timey strongman training facility that played a role in the birth of bodybuilding and strongman. This was vastly different from the tepid Prussian gymnastics Friedrich Ludwig Jahn had popularised, which was still considered the peak of physical training in Europe at the time. The physiques and strength of the men in Attila's gym, cultivated with weights, were far greater than those back home. But when he'd later visit the French colony Caribbean island of Martinique, he witnessed women working coal mines, lugging vast loads of coal over rugged terrain for miles, and these women had physiques equal or superior to the men back in Europe or at Attila's gym in New York. He also witnessed the resilience and endurance of rebel fighters in Uruguay and Colombia

amid civil war, as they moved through rugged terrains and crossed waters in the jungle under all conditions.

These examples were incomparable to the buttoned-up, sterile, gymnastics-based training in Europe. Although the bulky men at Attila's could pull a bar with cannonballs attached off the ground while wearing a leopard print unitard, their training in a pristine indoor environment couldn't compare to the raw innate physicality demonstrated by the people Hébert encountered in these wilder settings. These people had no special training beyond what their everyday lives required. However, what completely overhauled his view of physical education was his time stationed near Saint-Pierre, Martinique.

Saint-Pierre was the colony's cultural centre, known as the "Paris of the Caribbean". One crucial difference from Paris was that, instead of the Eiffel Tower, Saint-Pierre sat in the shadow of Mount Pelée, a 1,400-metre-high volcano. Mount Pelée erupted in 1902, and a cloud of incandescent lava particles, suspended by searing hot, turbulent gases, moved at hurricane speeds, decimating Saint-Pierre. 28,000 people were killed within minutes—the third-highest volcano death toll in recorded history.

Hébert's ship was the first ashore to help evacuate around seven hundred people from the cataclysm. Over the following days, Hébert realised a stark difference between the native Caribbean population and Martinique's French immigrant socialites. The natives could run, jump, climb, and swim to safety with relative ease, while the French colonials were helplessly clamouring for their lives. Many perished in droves, unable to do even the simplest of fundamental human movements to save their skins. It was a stark example of survival of the fittest.

Hébert, upon witnessing this tragedy, realised he'd have to rethink a few foundational principles for his training regimen. He knew he needed to incorporate movement into broader, applicable contexts. Thus was born *La Méthode Naturelle* (The Natural Method, which also came to be known as Hébertism), with its motto and core ethos: *être fort pour être utile* (be strong to be useful). The method encapsulates ten fundamental movement categories: walking,

running, jumping, climbing, swimming, throwing, lifting, self-defence, quadrupedal movement and balance. He considered these ten essentials the basis for all-around, practical physical fitness. Although Hébert primarily envisioned his method for civilian populations, he was hired by the French military to implement Hébertism and train their soldiers for combat.

When World War 1 began, they started incorporating Hébertist obstacle courses into training camps and scattered them throughout public spaces in France. Like adult play areas, with a utilitarian twist. These courses were called *parcours du combattant*, which translates to *obstacle course*. It was an exciting new fitness fad for soldiers and civilians alike for a while.

After witnessing the horrors of the First World War, Hébert refused to train soldiers, although his methods remained a staple in the French military and were soon adopted elsewhere. From 1925-35, there were over 250 Hébertist centres. The Natural Method was popular among French firefighters, police, other military personnel worldwide, and even private companies like Michelin Tires for their workers. You would expect Hébert to be over the moon about his Natural Method spreading so far and wide, but the more it expanded, the more he disassociated from it.

The people who had created the numerous centres worldwide wanted him to be the president of their association, but Hébert declined. In 1942, he was offered the position of chairman of the French Federation of Physical Education, overseeing physical education nationwide. Again, Hébert declined. His initial vision was for his methods to be integrated into people's lives, with self-development as the core of his ethos for helping others. The more Hébertism got legs, the more it spun out of his control. His ethos became diluted, used purely for physical achievement and strict applicability to a definitive end. Hébert disengaged entirely, and over the following decades, the influence of his methods began to dwindle.

Raymond Belle

David Belle's father, Raymond, became enamoured of Georges Hébert's Natural Method. His life was intense, to say the least. Some elements deserve profound respect, while others warrant considerably less... How's that for dramatic foreshadowing?

Raymond didn't exactly grow up in the best of circumstances. He was born in Hué, Vietnam, in 1939 to a Vietnamese mother and a French father who was a doctor for the colonial army. Burgeoning dissent against French rule boiled over into the first French Indochina War in 1946, and while Raymond was on vacation at an uncle's, he found himself cut off from his family by a front line that split the country in two. Soon after, it came to light that the seven-year-old Raymond was sexually abused whilst at his uncle's and was moved to a French military orphanage in Dalat. Coming from a wealthy family, young Raymond's life of privilege was thrust into hell. He was trained as a child soldier for nine years straight, taught to fight, to assemble and disassemble weapons in the dark, and forced on long rucks in the mountains. David's book states, "In Dalat, it was *walk or die*—survival of the fittest." And considering the horrific amount of civilian deaths and accounts of rape at the hands of the French army throughout the war, it's hard to imagine these Vietnamese children were treated well in the camp.

Following his abuse, Raymond was compelled to build an impervious shell as a coping mechanism and to avoid being victimised ever again. He began training around the clock. He did his military training during the day, and by night, he would sneak out for his personalised parcours du combattant training, progressively making it faster and more efficient. He created obstacle courses focusing on strength, endurance, agility, stealth and resilience. He faced harsh punishment whenever he was caught training at night, which only forced him to learn how to train silently.

As he hit his sweet sixteen in 1954, the Indochina War came to a close after the battle of Điện Biên Phủ with a decisive Vietnamese victory. Raymond and many other refugees were granted French citizenship and were stuck on a boat for Lyon, France.

According to his son's book, whilst aboard the ship, Raymond developed a testicular hernia, which became infected. He had to undergo an operation in the middle of the ocean on a boat brimming with other refugees. With no anaesthetics on hand, he bit down on a piece of wood as they cut into his giblets. This is in no way crucial to the story—just another *HELL FUCKING NO* moment to add to Raymond's list.

While in Dalat, he caught word that his father had been murdered. Some of his cousins told him that his mother and brothers had also been brought back to France. He would see his mother five or six times, but no longer felt anything for her. Since the age of seven, he had lived among kids who had lost both parents, so he learnt to erase all family ties the way they had, as if all feelings and emotions had been erased to turn them into little soulless soldiers.

He was taken in by a foster family and spent the next few years within the French military education system. It was here that he became aware of George Hébert's Natural Method. After completing his service in 1958, he joined the fire brigade at the age of nineteen. Not just any fire brigade—he joined the Sapeurs-pompiers, Paris's elite military-trained firefighting regiment. Because of the intense training he endured in his youth, Raymond was already well above his colleagues' level. He established himself as one of the most capable recruits, smashing virtually every record on the obstacle courses and winning several firefighting competitions. He was especially adept at rope climbing, hence the primary image you can see of him when you Google his name.

There are accounts of Raymond scaling buildings without a ladder by climbing drainpipes rapidly, then walking casually along small ledges, storeys above the street, without safety equipment. A well-documented exploit was on the 19th of January 1969, when he performed the first-ever helicopter mission conducted by the service to remove a Viet Cong flag attached to a flagpole around three hundred feet from the top of Notre Dame. Considering his heritage and past, you can imagine this may have been a profound emotional burden for Raymond. However, no one else from his regiment was brave enough to step up. Raymond was also greatly respected for his gymnastics abilities. He was often tasked with training recruits and

military personnel to move more effectively through urban areas. It's said that during one training exercise, Raymond lectured several recruits about how not fearing heights was crucial to being a good firefighter before running at full speed and performing a dive front flip out of a nearby window in full firefighter uniform. It sounds like he had a flair for the dramatics alongside all the athletic stuff. Raymond had undoubtedly found an outlet for his monstrous skills, which, though cultivated for death, were now turned towards saving people.

While all of David's friends were infatuated with Bruce Lee, David railed about how his father was superior to Bruce Lee. If you think about it, it's an all too common trope among young boys—sounding very similar to the whole "my dad could beat up your dad" spats. Sébastien Foucan's first trip to Sarcelles was solely motivated by meeting this mythical character David had endlessly chirped on about. He needed to know whether or not the stories his best friend told about his father were true. Sure enough, he'd meet a man with a potbelly who was way past his prime. In an *Evolve Move Play* podcast, Sébastien tells Rafe Kelley that he went even further, joining the fire brigade to learn more about Raymond. When he probed some of the older Sapeurs-pompiers guys about Raymond's time on the force, they said, "Raymond didn't do the sport; he was the sport." They always called him when there was any particularly messy mission. His peers would nickname him *kamikaze* (which is pretty awkward considering... you'll find out later).

So now the full picture starts to come together. As mentioned, Raymond's son, David, grew up without his dad until he was 14 and lived with his grandfather on his mother's side in Fécamp, Normandy. But that didn't stop him from hearing all the stories of his old man's physical feats and heroism from his grandfather. David admits the image he held of his father from the stories was that of a 2-metre-tall, giant, golden god of a man. And, of course, he grew up inspired by his dad, thinking of him as nothing short of a complete and utter superhero. Parkour's emergence wasn't as simple as his dad passing the baton, and suddenly, they got parkour. In his book, David explains

that to discover his father's background in sport and training, which led him to such a level, he had to dig, search, and nose around like a journalist trying to piece everything together. Through years of questioning Raymond and his older brother, Jean-François, David came to better understand what had made Raymond who he was. One recurring theme from his childhood was what Raymond called *parcours*. He explained that he adapted his courses from the standard *parcours du combattant* to focus on specific qualities. A passage from David's book reads:

> "To me, this word, *parcours*, was very abstract and didn't mean anything. He explained that there were different types of courses – or parcours – endurance, agility, resilience, and so on. There was even a silent course where he would practice with his friends to go from tree to tree in the forest, overlooking French patrols, without being noticed or heard. Their minds were already focused on warfare. For many, parkour is something fun nowadays, but for my father, it was vital—a matter of life or death. This training would help him get tough, survive through war and protect himself against all odds. My father was very patient, willing, tenacious and dedicated. He would take each obstacle and find the best way to go across. And he would repeat the movement fifty, one hundred times, until he mastered it to perfection. And he was only twelve or thirteen. Compared to him at the same age, I felt totally behind: if something happened to me, I would get upset and cry as if I had been beaten up. I was still playing with my Playmobil toys when he was suffering in the jungle at the same age."

David knew he had to make his own *parcours* to measure up to his dad. But instead of a Vietnamese military training camp for orphans, he had the streets of Lisses and Évry, and the Ecouen Forest in Sarcelles.

All that was needed was for David to find some like-minded little renegade mates to try to emulate and impress this strong but absent patriarchal hero figure. He found that in Yann Hnautra,

Sébastien Foucan and his cousins in Sarcelles, Williams, Châu and Phung.

Early on, when Raymond was living in the Belle household in Sarcelles, he would often pick up Williams, Châu, Phung and their sister Katty from school and take them to the Ecouen forest, where he would encourage them to climb, run and explore as well as challenge them by asking whether they could do this or that. Not merely sticking to the designated children's playground, they would scamper along the tops of the old stone walls surrounding it. They weren't warned away from the forest's hazardous features; instead, they were encouraged to be careful while exploring know and to learn them better. It was a regular occurrence with their uncle Raymond to get familiar with what they were capable of and go beyond it.

The Other Elder

Yann Hnautra grew up in New Caledonia until moving to France in his early teens. He was a particularly tough cookie and a wild soul, raised surrounded by nature. His father, a military man and stern patriarchal figure, pushed and trained him in various ways.

Yann and his family moved into a rough neighbourhood in Évry, where they were the first black family on their street. He has said, "If you wanted to just walk in certain streets, you had to be a man with a big M. You had to be able to cope with anything that could happen to you."

Much is written about Yann, describing him as an immensely strong bottomless pit of energy. I witnessed this firsthand at the 2017 International Gathering in Gerlev, Denmark. Even in his mid-forties, he was still unstoppable and always seemed to be laughing.

In his youth, Yann and his younger brother, Frederic, were regularly involved in street fights and would usually win. Yann would often build new friendships from such encounters, as they provided a visceral way to assess someone's character through the tense situations they elicit. This was precisely how Yann and David first became friends in 1987—Yann nearly knocked the spindly 14-year-old David's block off because he got frustrated when Yann wiped the floor

with him in a game of table tennis at their local youth centre. He was the eldest of the founders and was often lauded as a strong, motivating presence within the group. Yann and the others cannot be discounted or ignored as crucial pieces of the puzzle in developing parkour.

It's important to acknowledge that these individuals' obsessions may not have culminated into anything substantial without their group. It's easy to imagine that without each of them bouncing off each other's energy and ideas, feeding their collective insanity, their motivations may have dwindled as a short-lived infatuation. Most kids growing up in urban environments play in various ways that are exploratory and risky to some extent. We regularly hear boomers passing by a training session claiming, "I used to do this base jumpin' lark when I was younger. Way back before it was called some poncey French word."

I don't doubt that they fumbled about the walls of their estate when playing tag with their mates. Many of you may have seen the old black-and-white images of children hurling themselves onto mattresses from the high ledges of a dilapidated housing block. Engaging in risky play is natural, and in underfunded areas, young people make do with whatever is at hand, so walls and rails naturally become playgrounds. The difference is that the founders' collective obsession drew inspiration from multiple sources, allowing them to push deeper and deeper—continuing into uncharted territory for far longer.

Now, we have an idea of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic backdrop, along with the postwar brutalist architecture, and the social freedom to use it as they pleased. We also have the wealth of protagonist-based fiction on TV at the time that centred around transformation through training, the historical influence of Georges Hébert's Méthode Naturelle, and the heroic father and uncle, Raymond Belle. With these crucial ingredients thrown into the melting pot that was this handful of young and receptive banlieue lads, we now have a clearer picture of the ember from which our practice grew. However, this early sapling phase wasn't without its troubles. In the following chapter, we'll see how what began as

exploratory became riddled with turbulence as old-lady fame came calling.

Chapter 7 - Fame & Rifts

Knowing the different ingredients that allowed for parkour to take shape still doesn't explain how it spread worldwide or how it became divided into three separate names with differing ideologies. We'll now explore the timeline to see where things went awry, laying the bedrock for the confusion that followed.

Odd Jobs to Oddballs

The year was 1996, and the boys had grown into men (apart from Williams Belle, who was about 14). Now out of school and despite only wanting to carry on training, the real world's pressures were weighing down upon them. They picked up jobs here and there. Nothing special, as none of them had formal education or any special skills beyond jumping around. Some had completed their compulsory ten-month military service, which France discontinued in 1996. David tried following in his father's footsteps by joining the military fire brigade, the Sapeurs-pompiers, but injured his wrist during training. He then enrolled in the Marines and the commandos, but according to him, they were too tame. In his book, he claims, "Compared to my training, the army felt like an amusement park. I couldn't feel proud about crawling in a pipe under a road because it was nothing compared to what I had been doing back home."

He also says he left because he didn't gel with taking orders. He wanted to choose his own challenges, not those a screaming drill sergeant commanded. He later worked as a warehouse worker, security guard, and furniture salesman. No doubt way more challenging and way more freedom...

Others also worked in construction, as waiters, and in painting and decorating. Sébastien completed his Sapeurs-pompiers training (no hard feelings, David!) They knew that if all they wanted to do was train, it would be possible only if they could make a living from

it. This was when they decided to go public with what they were doing. This was supposedly the first time they picked up a camera. In 1997, Jean-François Belle, David's older half-brother, had assembled a demo tape of the group's best stuff, including a few doing the iconic Manpower gap.

Jean-François, who was working for the fire brigade, swung them a gig, performing at an open day alongside the Sapeurs-pompiers' elite gymnastics team to a crowd of over a thousand people. According to accounts from an informant who shall remain anonymous (Sacha Powell), when performing with Urban Playground, Malik Diouf suffered from vomit-inducing stage fright. This was in 2014, so imagine how bad he must have felt in front of over a thousand people in 1997, with no idea how parkour would be received. No one had seen anything like what they'd been doing before, and all the audience had to compare them to was the elite gymnasts they shared the stage with. A photo from the performance shows Sébastien Foucan hurtling down a zip line wearing a black balaclava.

Guylain N'Guba-Boyeke came up with a name for their group, Yamakasi, which in Lingala (a Bantu language from the Democratic Republic of Congo) roughly translates to *strong body, strong spirit, strong man*. *Yamakasi* was plastered on their white sweatshirts with a logo that Foucan had also designed. As a name for what they were doing, Foucan came up with *L'Art Du Déplacement* (the art of movement/displacement) because he thought it best described what they did. They now had a name for themselves, another for the practice, and the loose usage of *'parcours'*.

Jean-François, practically acting as their manager, managed to swing them another gig. This time on national television. Their 1997 *Stade 2* feature was the first time parkour was televised (or its name at the time, L'Art Du Déplacement. Although in the piece, you can see a close-up shot of a white shirt with *Parcours* emblazoned on it.) The short piece followed the Yamakasi around Lisses and Évry, including the Dame du Lac. There's a shot where they are huddled together on the Dame du Lac, and David explains (translated from French):

> "Every single obstacle is taking part in our art. Every single obstacle, as soon as we start moving, as soon as we face a difficulty, that's it, that's what we are working on. Without this, I'm convinced we would have done a lot of bullshit. But it happened every time we were together and didn't know what to do. One would start to move, wondering if he could grab something there... Yes! Then, everyone would follow, and small challenges would begin. We asked ourselves: What would happen if we trained this to a champion level, following a precise training programme, and repeated it regularly every day? Looking back, if someone had told us, in ten years, you'll jump from here to there, we would never have believed it!"

This 1997 TV spot was the first nudge that got the ball rolling. What followed was an influx of attention. But the full Yamakasi team was very short-lived.

The Split

Sure enough, just as opportunities were suddenly pouring in from everywhere because of their growing media attention, the gang broke up in February 1998. David and Sébastien just up and left. Sébastien felt that their practice was better suited to education than to performance. David wanted to get involved in films. He also began to doubt how closely their training followed his father's footsteps. David was on a personal journey for his father. It was all about his dad, and he begrudged the others for not recognising Raymond's influence on what they had developed. He was inspired by his father's values and the stories of his various styles of parcours du combattant back in Dalat, Vietnam. He ventured to set himself aside from the others and focus on a purely useful practice. However, he still went on to make the video *On Avance Toujours et vous?*, which opens with a minute-worth of flips in a gym. But in his book, in retrospect, he explains, "I have to admit that it was also a mistake to put some acrobatics in my first videos, but when I did those demos, it was to ignite a spark and

have the young start thinking, *'Hey, I don't know why he's doing it, but he makes me want to put my sneakers on, go outside and move!'"*

Maybe at the same time, as the attention came pouring in, one could wonder if the split from the others was more to get his hands on a larger slice of fame pie—he longed for the big screen after all. He may have felt he deserved it because he believed, in his heart, that it came from his father, and he knew he was more skilled than the others. In *Breaking The Jump*, Laurent Piemontesi says, "David likes to have the light on him. Yann and the others like it when the light is on everyone, and that makes a big difference." In conversation with Châu Belle Dinh on the set of *6 Underground*, he flatly told me that David is a narcissist.

Around this time, David slapped together the iconic video *Speed Air Man* as an attempt to audition to be a stunt double for Spider-Man for the upcoming film. Yes, the first one with Tobey Maguire. No, he didn't get the role.

Parcours to Parkour

To jump-start his film career, David met with *La Haine* star Hubert Koundé. He was impressed by what he'd seen of David's movement and offered him acting lessons. David wanted what he was doing to be known, to grant his father the recognition he believed he deserved. He strove to set aside what he was doing from the Yamakasi. So, as a harebrained branding scheme, Koundé suggested changing the word *parcours* to *parkour*. David clearly thought the idea was a good one.

Et voilà! In the space of a year, this thing they were happily doing without an official name suddenly had two. For around a decade, it seems they couldn't have cared less about a name, any borders or clear dogmatic distinctions for what they were doing, and then, when old lady fame came along and flashed her scabby old ankles, the lads rushed to get their acts together, which sadly resulted in the pioneers and the sport becoming fragmented. However, a race for the limelight and the lack of credit to Raymond wouldn't be the only wedge between the group.

The Guard's Faults

As mentioned, Raymond Belle lived in Sarcelles with David's cousins, Williams, Châu, and Phung, and their parents, for ten years. But one day, he was abruptly banished from their home. To again quote Julie Angel's book, *Breaking The Jump:*

> "Raymond's behaviour meant he would never set foot in the house again. Whatever his previous hardships, rescues and other brave acts, what happened meant the Belles in Sarcelles could no longer hold him in high esteem. He would be acknowledged as many things – the extraordinary athlete, the exemplary employee, a hardworking professional and a responsible man – but he was not a hero."

This vague passage undoubtedly left readers guessing. When interviewed for the book, Williams Belle wanted Julie Angel to make the whole story public, but she felt it wasn't her secret to share and didn't have a firm relationship with some victims, nor did she have their consent. However, when Angel's book went to print in April 2016, Williams decided to spill the beans himself. In a lengthy Facebook post on the 30th of April 2016, Williams wrote:

> "I also have been quite surprised to see my Uncle Raymond Belle portrayed as a hero. I respect and appreciate that he is a symbol of strength and courage and was an inspiration for some, but for me, it is a different story. I was partly raised by my uncle during my childhood. He was hosted and welcomed by my parents for years, and then kicked out from our place after my father found out he was abusing my sister. Often we idealise and fall into the trap of fascination, opening doors for the projection we idolise to manipulate us and make us puppets."

If Williams' words are true, "not a hero" is a horrendous understatement. Needless to say, Raymond's alleged putrid actions

only deepened the divide between the remaining Yamakasi and David. David sided with his father, and the others could not simply forgive and forget.

On New Year's Eve 1999, David received a message from his father that read, "La Garde meurt mais ne se rend pas!" – *The guard dies but does not surrender.* This was a quote from Napoleon's general, who was being called upon to surrender at the Battle of Waterloo. Upon reading this text, David and Stephane Vigroux (David's new protégé) rushed to his father's apartment to find the door already broken in, his brother, other firefighters and a pool of blood. Raymond Belle had taken his own life with a shotgun.

David continued to portray his father as the hero he saw him as in every interview that followed, and indeed, in his two books. He maintained that parkour was decisively from his father and passed directly to him, rather than being an equal communal effort of embodied research and the search for identity among those involved. This remained the widely accepted story until the release of Julie Angel's book. Even then, the heaps of bite-sized information online far outweigh the version of history portrayed in the book. I have come across a few articles even portraying the Yamasaki as loyal students under the tutelage and guidance of their master, David. In the same Facebook post where Williams Belle lays out the truth about his Uncle Raymond, it reads:

> "In 1990, I was very fortunate to live the birth of the practice when the foundations weren't established yet. Yann Hnautra and David Belle, the elders, were outstanding due to their physical abilities; my brother Phung Belle was also outstanding because of his strong mental ability; others who also took part made parkour what it was and what it is today. Everybody was an apprentice in a learning phase; no one could pretend to be superior to another."

It must have been tough for David to reconcile. He had viewed his father as a deified, archetypal hero, whose legend he'd striven to live up to and shape his existence around. Then, all of a sudden, a

bombshell so ghastly threatened to shatter the north star that stood as his sole source of meaning with which he oriented himself. In his 2009 book, *Parkour* – which is practically 60% talking about how fantastic his dad was – at one point, he explains:

> "The only things he never told me about were maybe a few negative aspects of his personality that he didn't want his son to see. My father had his faults – he wasn't perfect – but his numerous qualities erased all the rest. And his good nature was often turned against him. People could use and abuse him, for he couldn't refuse help when he was asked. He can't be blamed for whatever harm he may have done in his life because he truly was a good person at heart."

I can't help but read into this as an acknowledgement and an attempt to justify his father's alleged incestuous paedophilic abuse. I don't think "his numerous qualities" would be enough to "erase all the rest" for his cousins, Williams, Phung and Châu. One can only imagine the convoluted inner turmoil David suffered to see beyond the allegations and still hold his father in such high regard. But either way, the line in the sand – drawn before only through mere disagreements or limelight hogging – had now deepened beyond repair.

Yamakasi vs Les Traceurs (ADD vs Parkour)

> *Everyone wanted to do it their own way, arguing over and over where it all started, some who never wanted to admit it came from one place; well, we got divided instead of being united. We are now in a 'divide and conquer' type of strategy.*
>
> -David Belle in a 2009 interview with Raphael Koster

The years that followed essentially consisted of the two groups seizing opportunities as they came. The Yamakasi were lapped up by *Léon: The Professional* and *The Fifth Element* writer and director Luc Besson,

after seeing them perform in the *Notre-Dame de Paris* musical in 1999. In 2000, they were featured in Besson's French action movie, *Taxi 2*, dressed as ninjas, escaping a cop after a kidnapping. The following year, Besson got them back for their very own film, entitled *Yamakasi: Les samouraïs des temps modernes* (The modern-day samurai). The film was essentially a dramatised version of them being twenty-first-century Robin Hoods of the banlieue, utilising their parkour skills to steal from the rich to give to a kid needing a heart transplant. It was a hit in France. It led the French public to shout *'Yamakasi'* at anyone training for years to come. For example, when I was training at a seafront spot in Brighton around 2008, a group of French teenagers yelled the word at me. And sure enough, it was still the same when training in Paris in 2017. The public shouting *Yamakasi* might be the French equivalent of *'HARCORE PARKOUR!'* Although it may have been great for promoting the Yamakasi, it didn't do much to spread the term L'Art Du Déplacement as the name for their practice. The Yamakasi film led to copycat Frenchies, and likely due to the severe lack of information or references to base their imitations on, two of them died. David has referred to the film as a "prostitution of the art", all the while he was making his desperate efforts to squeeze into the same industry.

After the movie's release in 2001, a TF1 TV piece followed David around Lisses, where he seemed to be indulging in performing at his local spots and speaking about parkour. It also likely featured parkour's first POV shot, with David climbing Dame du Lac. GoPro, eat your heart out! Sébastien Foucan was shown, too, but they failed to include any of his words and instead unfairly depicted him as David's obedient lackey, following him about.

The narrator says, "Among Parkour practitioners, David Belle is recognised as the master. But in Paris, he is not the famous one."

It then cuts to show the Yamakasi on what appears to be their press tour for the movie. They're doing the rounds, speaking on different talk shows, dressed all prim and proper in their glad rags, before cutting back to David in Lisses, pushing himself and training with his local disciples while still living with his mum. He talks about how his story is a quest for his father. Oh, how the media loves a sob story of an unsung hero. Especially with the element of the recently

deceased heroic parent to pull at some heartstrings. If there's an emotional narrative that reporters can weave in, they will. And in doing so, tipped history to work well in David's favour. In the same Facebook post from 2016, Williams Belle reflects upon the massively influential TV piece, explaining:

> "The story of a group of friends who met, sharing a quest and research of freedom, challenging themselves in the form of physical games, transcendence of self, exchange of ideas, thoughts and reflections about life, sharing precious and intense moments; and with the input of everyone's different life and experience it gave birth to the Yamakasi for some and parkour for others. But in 2001, in the TV news report, we rediscover parkour with a new history... This time, a cousin who became the ultimate master, surrounded by his disciples called Traceurs, and presented as the creator and trainer of the Yamakasi. This act took away from me the years of hard work and personal efforts I made, and also made me a thief for the Traceurs; I became their enemy."

David had taken under his wing a merry band of disciples, including Stephane and Johann Vigroux, Steve 'Kazuma' Rognoni, Michael Ramdani, Thomas Couetdic, Jerome Ben Aoues, Rudy Duong, Romain Moutault, and Sébastien Goudot. They called themselves *Les Traceurs*. Foucan, at the time, mainly worked due to pressure from his parents to get a *real* job. He later joined Les Traceurs when they saw an increase in parkour work, notably in the three Nike commercials of 2001: *Le chat effrayant* (The scary cat), which featured the gang, led by David, running and jumping to find a bloke in a cat suit. *Premier amour* (Young love) had David descend the famed 180 arm jump staircase in Lisses to retrieve his butterfingered lover's belongings. *Le poulet en colere* (the angry chicken) featured Foucan struggling to evade a chicken. Indeed, some cutting-edge advertisement. The latter in particular went on to win awards and was nominated for an Emmy. The popularity of this specific ad certainly worked in Foucan's favour in the future.

At the time, the Yamakasi didn't seem to focus on sharing the name *L'Art Du Déplacement*. While they were busying themselves with various movies and Broadway shows, such as *Notre Dame de Paris*, Les Traceurs were pushing their abilities, filming themselves, and associating with the clear-cut term parkour. The Yamakasi, for whatever reason, weren't pushing their name until much later. You'll struggle to find footage shot from this period. Also, in the Yamakasi's *Ripley's Believe It or Not* feature in 2001, a name for what they were doing, for whatever reason, was left vague. They didn't mention parkour, parcours, or Art du Déplacement; instead, it focused solely on their group's name, and it was left to the presenter to fill in the gaps by describing it, once again, as "a cross between ballet and building jumping". The presenter also states, "they got their start in 1997 with their seven original members," thus omitting David, Sébastien, and other lesser-known key players. No name was given for what they were doing or any clear definition other than Laurent Piemontesi stating, "In this city, what can I do?"

All in all, it was pretty ambiguous. Les Traceurs and parkour, on the other hand, were more straightforward in the media. Les Traceurs was also active on *parkour.fr.st,* which became the first-ever parkour forum, created by Tim Pisteur. Although Tim initially created it as a resource, collecting the meagre scraps for others interested, it became a place for people to discuss and meet.

At the time, the internet was relatively new and not everybody could access it. The Yamakasi were developing Art du Déplacement and began mentoring others, but all under the radar. They weren't publishing themselves anywhere online. So those who had caught a glimpse on TV, whether through Ripley's Believe It or Not or the Yamakasi movie, then dug around on the web and inevitably fell upon *parkour.fr.st* or videos of David or Les Traceurs. We thought we had it bad when we were searching for a sense of everything from 2003 to 2007, when these second-generation guys from France were essentially wading through a thick fog of obscurity. Mark Toorock from the US discovered parkour while on a business trip to the UK in 2002, when some coworkers mentioned David Belle's *Rush Hour* BBC ident. In a 2007 New Yorker article, Toorock explains:

> "I started looking for him on the Internet, and I found a French forum where he was mentioned. Back then, there weren't any parkour sites. I made an attempt to speak to the people on the forum, but they were less than interested in talking to anyone who spoke English, and they weren't polite about it. I later found out they didn't really want parkour spreading. It was theirs, or so they felt. It's a very narrowly defined discipline, and they didn't want it misunderstood."

And to make matters worse, back then, they had a frustratingly slow dial-up internet connection, if they were lucky enough to have internet at all. In a 2007 blog post called *Memories of an early Parkour experience*, Thomas Couetdic reflects:

> "Only a minimal amount of information was available (sometimes true, and sometimes not), making parkour appear as some kind of lost art. We (the few guys aware of parkour but not living in Lisses) didn't know who these incredible athletes were or what they were capable of. Parkour was wrapped in a fascinating aura of secret and mystery."

Couetdic used to travel 220km from his hometown to Lisses to meet Les Traceurs and try to learn the mystifying stuff he had only seen on TV. But, as Williams said, if you were training with Les Traceurs, you were guaranteed to be indoctrinated into believing that the Yamakasi were the enemy.

The Yamakasi seemed to take offence whenever what they were doing was mistakenly labelled parkour. In Craig Constantine's *Movers Mindset* podcast, Stany Boulifard Mallet tells the story of meeting the Yamakasi for the first time. In 2004, at a premiere for their second Yamakasi movie, *Les Fils du Vent* (in English: *The Sons of the Wind*), they performed after the screening, followed by a Q&A. Stany eagerly raised his hand and asked, "How do you train parkour? Is it only jumping as we see in the movie, or are you doing something else?"

And the Yamakasi all looked at each other as if thinking, "Who is this guy?" Châu replies, "We're not doing parkour. What we are doing is called L'Art Du Déplacement."

In the podcast, Stany said that he felt he'd touched a nerve.

In another *Movers Mindset* podcast, Chris Rowat tells the story of randomly meeting Williams Belle on a metro train while he and others were on their 'pilgrimage' to Lisses and Évry. They recognised him from the Yamakasi movie and were all starstruck, not knowing what to do or say. By this point, Williams had noticed them gawking awkwardly but was playing it cool, looking out the window and not engaging. One of the guys with Chris slinked over and hesitantly asked, "Do you do parkour?"

Williams looked him dead in the eyes and flatly replied, "No," before returning his gaze out the window. Another member of the group mustered the courage for a second attempt. He timidly sidled over and simply asked, "Yamakasi?" Then Williams' demeanour changed, and he became very open and warm towards them. He even helped them figure out where they were going on the metro, and they shared a short training session while waiting for the next train.

This disdain apparently persists in recent years. In a 2020 Parkour Earth Global Engagement Project video forum, Damien Puddle mentions that the Yamakasi didn't align themselves with Parkour Earth because they took issue with the name not representing Art Du Déplacement. Apparently, paying lip service to ADD in their confusing website description wasn't enough for them.

There certainly seemed to be resentment toward David and parkour among the Yamakasi. And vice versa. The media skewed and twisted their collective history, ultimately favouring David.

In case you were wondering, in 2002, David finally made the big screen... with a whole five seconds of screen time as a police officer helping tourists with directions in an establishing shot in the Antonio Banderas film *Femme Fatale*. But then, in 2004, he got his break starring in Luc Besson's film *Banlieue 13* (District 13), alongside acrobat and stuntman Cyril Raffaelli. It was set in the near future in a fictionalised dystopian suburb of Paris. (However, as Paris's banlieues weren't ghetto enough, it was shot in Romania...) In my opinion, the

film surpassed *Yamakasi: Les samouraïs des temps Modernes* and arguably has the best parkour chase scene in any movie. It featured many iconic moments, especially the Manpower gap, shot from a new, unseen overhead angle. In 2009, it was followed by its less iconic sequel, District *13: Ultimatum*. Then, an even less iconic Hollywood remake of the first called *Brick Mansions*, starring the late Paul Walker. They make a super-far-fetched and Hollywoodised version of the original chase scene. (Hardly worth your time, in my opinion.) David is still working in film, hugging close to his pal Luc Besson. He played a small role as a mafia goon in *The Family*, starring Robert De Niro, and seems to be accruing more lead roles. By David's own logic regarding parkour in films being "a prostitution of the art", he is undoubtedly the biggest pimp there is.

The World at Boiling Point

Around the turn of the millennium, The Matrix and the live-action Spider-Man films were released. Skateboarding and other street sports exploded in mainstream popularity thanks to the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* video game franchise, the X Games, and numerous subsequent urban sports video game releases. In this period, when environment-subverting sports were everywhere, and every teenager had seen Peter Parker, Trinity, Morpheus, and Neo fly across rooftops, you could say the need for something like parkour was reaching a boiling point. The development of such a practice had the potential to spring up naturally, virtually anywhere with access to a TV.

It's been said that the legendary Latvian Oleg Vorslav had no idea what parkour was until someone told him one day that what he was doing already had a name. The equally legendary Daniel Ilabaca from a suburb of Liverpool naturally started practising something close to parkour in the early 2000s. He only realised that some people had established a practice in France after being shown the Yamakasi on Ripley's Believe It or Not. Rafe Kelley, from Seattle, tells a story of when, in 2005, he introduced parkour to a quirky guy who was doing unconventional dive rolls over obstacles and swinging between bars

in a gymnastics gym. He had never heard of it but claimed to have already been practising many jumps around their city.

In the 2005 documentary *Jump Britain,* John Kerr (aka Kerbie) says that before finding parkour, he used to do aggressive inline skating with his friends on their estate until the council pebbled over everything to stop them. Then they started playing in the playgrounds until they were asked to leave because they were too old. So, for almost being backed into a corner with very little else to do, they started climbing on everything and jumping about their estate.

I remember even my friends and I on the school playground around 2001, when I was ten years old; we used to play what we called foot skating, inspired by the Tony Hawk games. A kind of skate hobby-horsing, if you will. We jumped stairs while grabbing our feet, did the worst horizontal wall runs you'd ever see, and shuffled along benches in our school shoes, pretending to grind. Likely while making grinding sound effects with our mouths.

There are so many stories about crude-sounding versions of parkour, unbeknownst to its prior existence. Something was percolating in the early 2000s; all the while, a group of Frenchmen had been working hard on it in solitude for over a decade. I'm far from saying that anyone in these stories above had a hand in creation. My point is that we were a generation predisposed to needing something like parkour for many reasons. The founders also clearly needed it. The difference between them and everyone else lies in the circumstances that pushed them further, and a little sooner, to dig deeper and for a lot longer. It was the perfect storm for them. All these factors were in the melting pot, along with a fortunately similar fanatic group of friends. Their environment and upbringing instilled in them a mentality and a zealous obsession that kept them putting in the work to explore and push themselves deeper into the rabbit hole than anyone else. And none of it was filmed for the longest time because, despite not having cameras, they didn't care about sharing it. In their niche, little isolated bubble, they didn't care if people knew. Maybe they didn't think anyone else would care. And perhaps because they didn't care that no one would care kept them caring...

Rather than the other misfit lone wolves like Ilabaca and Vorslav in the early 2000s, the founders seemed to be a perfect

conglomerate of outliers, each with an unrelenting passion that drove the group. For Ilabaca and Vorslav – in a different time when they couldn't have stumbled upon parkour when they did – without a similar group of fanatics as the founders had, their obsession might have fizzled out as a brief phase. The founders would stay around each other's parents' houses and talk until the early hours about training and what it meant to them. It was their battle and their exploration. It didn't have a name for many years because it was unnecessary. They had no strict definition because there was no need for one. They knew it only as a fertile ground to push and express themselves, learn about themselves and become strong in every conceivable way. Their practice remained isolated in its little bubble, stewing for about a decade. It took off only when the world noticed what these near-feral animals were capable of. It was inevitably bound to gain attention eventually. Imagine back then, seeing a group of jacked men doing the Manpower gap! No one would have seen anything even remotely close to such a raw spectacle before. And with the rest of the world practically ready to burst at the seams, when what these men from the banlieue had been cultivating came to light, it was like an eruption.

The 2001 film *Yamakasi* and David Belle's BBC *Rush Hour* ident in 2002 acted as the cat out of the bag for international audiences. One hundred years after Georges Hébert's epiphany following the Mount Pelée volcanic eruption in 1902. A one-hundred-year gestation period for the birth of a new movement. It was now the world's gift to do with what they wanted. Anyone with a sketchy dial-up internet connection could then dig around on forums for scraps of information about this mysterious new movement, wait a mere few hours to download a pixelated 144p two-minute video, and try to emulate what they saw. So many people got what they needed. The floodgates had opened. However, it didn't come without nearly a decade of imbecilic and vitriolic online spats.

Chapter 8 - Freerunning: A Fork in the Road

I realise we're coming to the definition in a tremendously windy way. We are certainly taking the scenic route there. Still, hopefully, this chapter is enough to whet your whistle until then. Something that created an ideological fork in the road that ultimately never needed to happen.

The birth of the term *freerunning* is widely unknown and outrageously misunderstood. Many credit Sébastien Foucan as the sole founder of freerunning, known as the newer, freer, and more expressive younger sibling of parkour. But it's not quite as cut-and-dry as that.

Jump London

The term was coined briefly before Mike Christie's film *Jump London* went into production. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Jump London was a documentary that was first broadcast in the UK on *Channel 4* in September 2003. It was followed by its sequel, *Jump Britain*, which aired in January 2005. The two films are likely the most pivotal and influential media for parkour's worldwide growth. Even today, I can't think of anything that has come close to the impact of these two documentaries in rousing people to train.

Jump London introduced the physical spectacle of parkour to a vast, receptive audience, and it was the first piece of televised media to convey some of the spirit and mentality behind the practice. The leading figure in both documentaries was Sébastien Foucan, accompanied by a small handful of second-generation practitioners from Les Traceurs: Johann Vigroux, Jerome Ben-Aoues and Stephane Vigroux. The documentary features them doing parkour on several famous London landmarks. Most of them were terrible for parkour, but you can bet the idea was to attract a larger audience. You'll likely have noticed that companies using parkour in their ad campaigns often use the same tactic, rather than choosing a location where parkourists can showcase their best abilities.

Most of the movement in the documentary is laughable compared to today's standards. Perhaps excluding Foucan's gap on the warship, although despite being huge, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, crash mats were used for the landing. HMS Belfast was the ship to take the first shots at the beaches of Normandy on D-Day in June 1944, only for the French to get payback decades later with one of their citizens trampling all over the guns on British national television. At the time, for anyone watching, it was all groundbreaking. Toward the film's end, a professor of architectural history and urban culture named Iain Borden observes, "In many ways, the future of freerunning could be the future of skateboarding, inline skating and extreme BMX riding. In a way, it's a very pure form of that. It's the same kind of thing without the equipment. Freerunning could be the new urban activity for young men and women, perhaps older men and women in the city."

Oh, how right you were, Iain.

The word *parkour* was used only once in the entire documentary. *Freerunning* was the term used throughout. This was also the first piece of media in which freerunning was uttered. So how did it come about?

We have all heard that Foucan founded freerunning as an expressive offshoot of parkour, but that's not entirely accurate. When Mike Christie set out to make the film, Foucan's manager and business partner, Guillaume Pelletier, suggested using *freerunning* instead of *parkour* because it's a more straightforward term for English-speaking audiences. (And honestly, thinking that uncultured British chuds wouldn't be able to swallow an already anglicised French term is a fair assumption.) However, according to an anonymous informant (Mike Christie), the overarching motive was a business idea for a coaching certification scheme, which, in a way, was what Stephane Vigroux subsequently influenced through Parkour Generation's *ADAPT* coaching scheme. However, aside from the new name, the activity discussed was the same. It was a simple rebrand of parkour.

In Christie's original treatment of Jump London, he used the term *freerunning* only once and repeatedly used *le parkour* and *parkouriste* throughout the document. However, Guillaume Pelletier's suggestion to anglicise the name appealed to Christie because he believed *freerunner* was simply catchier in English than *parkouriste*. Consequently, the documentary's actual script flipped it around; he used the word *parkour* only once and switched to *freerunning* and *freerunner*, as the Anglo-friendly mashing of two words would make things easier. Pelletier appeared briefly in the film—his caption was "CEO, Free Run Planet". We can guess that *Free Run Planet* might have been the awful name for the coaching certification that never got off the ground. In a 2009 interview with Raphael Koster, David Belle says, "We had a simple sport, why does everyone want to give it a new name? *'It's like Parkour, but it's called Free Running style thingy...'* But it is Parkour! When you go to any other country around the world, you say *'I play soccer or volleyball'*. The name of the sport does not change. So why change the name of Parkour unless you want to do some kind of business with it and be able to say, *'I am the creator of this new sport, exactly like Parkour except that you only jump on one leg'*? Change one thing to say that you are the creator of something and be able to make some business with it."

So, there you have it. A new third name for the sport was born and spread like wildfire among every teenage cretin with a TV that was itching to do something other than play PlayStation 2. And it was all for marketing, folks! Parkour and freerunning were two words for the same thing, and Mike Christie chose to embrace the new English-friendly term as a clever, direct translation, which unwittingly led to somewhat of a cluster-fuck down the line.

But where did it all go wrong? Two separate names surely shouldn't cause too much of a hullabaloo in the following years, should they? After all, if you'll permit me to quote a bit of Shakespeare, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other word would smell as sweet."

What subsequent chain of events led to the years of flame wars on internet forums and YouTube comments, debating that they should or shouldn't be entirely different sports, what moves were

considered parkour or freerunning and which weren't, and who is part of this cult and who is part of that cult? What caused this divisive shitstorm and confusion that, in some cases, remains today?

Retrofitted Distinction

To Christie's surprise and delight, Jump London wasn't only received exceptionally well in English-speaking countries, but many others lapped it up, too. It was sold and aired in eighty different countries worldwide. It was the UK's seventh-biggest TV export in 2004. To put this in perspective, *Little Britain* was eighth. Although, realistically, despite Christie touting this achievement to flatter himself, if you've seen Little Britain, it's easy to understand why other countries might find it challenging to appreciate the British-centric jokes. Regardless, the film was a roaring success. At least, enough for Christie to secure funding for a sequel, which again featured Foucan as more of a leading role, along with many other young, sweatband-wearing British runts from the new group Urban Freeflow and a bunch of other colourfully dressed teenagers who had spent the last two years trying to replicate what they had seen in Jump London and David's BBC commercial. The fact that Jump Britain featured many others who had taken it up made it seem far more attainable and accessible to anyone else interested. This resulted in yet another wave of people starting parkour.

In Jump Britain, the terms parkour and freerunning were used interchangeably and reasonably equally. The cringeworthy abbreviation *"PK"* was also used here and there. But since the last film, Sébastien had attached additional meanings to the term *freerunning*. It was considered a more expressive and free practice, untethered from the bonds that a small but destructive handful of David Belle's words imposed on the word *parkour*.

Now, people could make a clear distinction between the two. In the following years, a line in the sand began to emerge between those practising for the freedom to move how they pleased and a group who prided themselves on the rigidity of a discipline they felt was solely for its practical purposes and who strived to piece together

and interpret all the fragmented bits of information they could find online about how their deified founders trained. And that information was usually cherry-picked to solidify their prior stance further and justify how they chose to train.

The Purist's Flip-Blocking Glasses

Many of the online arguments seemed to be heavily centred around flips, even though there were many ways in which the efficiency camp moved that contradicted their proclaimed intentions. There were many other ways they were altering a clear route or adding superfluous, disorienting elements without flipping. To any rational thinking person, rail flow, where you're weaving in and out of a cluster of handrails with various stylised vaults and those twirly 360 underbar and butt-spin things, can't be seen as efficient. But so long as you're not going upside down, you're not breaking the efficiency laws, right? The more ardent purist would make arguments against these moves, too. Because god forbid anyone does anything fun, even for a second. All energy must be conserved for becoming a useful, altruistic human, not on whimsical, frivolous butt-spins! Even though a giant proportion of the efficiency camp's energy was spent on superfluous and arduous physical conditioning, compared to becoming a proficient mover by doing the sport.

For a group so intent on adhering to the founders' words, they did seem to ignore many crucial actions in plain sight. One is David Belle's video, *On Avance Toujours, et vous?* (We are always moving forward, and you?), where, as mentioned in the last chapter, the first minute is, quite literally, all flips in a gym. And then there's his iconic *Speed Air Man*, which had countless showy reverse vaults, a 360 arm jump to his ribs and forearms in classic Yamakasi fashion, and a big fat layout backflip. Although not a flip or spin, David's iconic air forms are another glaring example: the classic knees-up, arms cocked back with fingers splayed, which is parodied by so many parkourists to this day. You can't convince me that's purely for aerodynamics! Then, in the first ten seconds of *Speed Air Man*, he's 'the running man'

on a roof gap. How about the air form from David's iconic silhouette photo? The one subsequently plastered on countless early parkour T-shirts, almost always mixed in with some of the worst graphic design possible on an item of clothing. You'd have a hard time convincing anyone that these jumps were without stylistic intent. David wanted to look fabulous in the air. This is from the man who drip-fed the efficiency camp their A-to-B doctrine, yet they turn a blind eye to flips, spins, and all forms of stylistic movement from their holiness.

Another piece of media from the founders, viewed by the purists seemingly through flip-blocking glasses, was the 2006 feature-length documentary *Generation Yamakasi*. Despite including some incredible roof gaps and valuable interviews with the Yamakasi, it had a high density of flips and spinning moves. I'd say a good third of the movement in the film was flips and palm spins. Another third were sketchy or flamboyant-looking roof gaps. The last third of the film's movement involved many lines that looked like pottering about in all directions. (Granted, it was 2006, and the skill was limited compared to today's standards, so any line back then without a massive height drop will likely look like pottering about.) In essence, this pottering about was a primitive example of creative line-building—expressive, fun, or challenging sequences.

Creative line-building and stylistic intent didn't start after freerunning was dreamt up. They had been part of the practice from the moment the founders began moving in their environment. In a 2009 interview, Stephane Vigroux explains, "In the beginning, they were one group of friends practising the same art. It was the same discipline, same name, and same way of practising."

Even from videos as early as the mid-90s, it's clear that lines were formed with style and aesthetics in mind.

Following this ideologically distinct new name, the cognitive dissonance in some arguments was astounding. People argued that some seemingly non-useful moves may still prove applicable in some particular circumstances. Some moves may be inadvertently practical to train. In Chapter 4, I used the example of sticks and meandering flow lines, in which the route either doubles back on itself or darts from point to point rather than following a clearly defined path. With sticks, you're coming to a dead stop, but by drilling a variety of sticks,

you're honing your control and judgment for power output. And, of course, there are indeed scenarios where landing precisely and staying on a beam can be a necessary feature of a route. With meandering flow lines, you're still working on moves widely applicable to routes. However, the cognitive dissonance came in when people tried to justify flips, spins, and other disorienting movements by creating oddly specific imaginary scenarios. "A side flip would be parkour if you had to get over a barbed wire fence and you were handcuffed and you couldn't dive roll over because you were shirtless and the floor was spiky..."

The scenarios often involved saving yourself from falling, occasionally referencing a rumour about Daniel Ilabaca miraculously saving himself when a drainpipe came loose while he was climbing it by performing a backflip. It's not even that these arguments lacked any validity, as there are endless examples of people saving falls with the aerial awareness gained from flips. It's more that the real, more pertinent question they should be asking is, WHO FUCKING CARES?!

Honestly, it frustrates me even to write about this, as it drums up the same frustration I felt back then. Rather than trying to justify their preferences with nonsensical, futile arguments, they should have cracked on with how they wanted to move, regardless of what label or camp their peers or forum keyboard cretins wanted to put them in. Imagine going to such lengths to avoid being tarred with the brush of someone who wants to move how they feel, without the convoluted ulterior motive of preparing for an emergency.

It was often the case that if some couldn't do flips due to fear or lack of coordination, they would rally against flips on the righteous purist side of the debate. When they said, "I don't do flips", with an air of superiority, they typically meant, "I can't do flips." And if you could do a few flips, you were less inclined to care much at all, apart from the few who chose to debate as they couldn't help but retaliate to the snooty words of the uppity, pretentious, holier-than-thou, origins-obsessed rabble who were all too often intent on alienating others.

Hate-Tinted Glasses

In Jimmy The Giant's 2020 video titled *The Strange Parkour vs Freerunning Debate*, he says, "This definition war tore parkour down the middle. It made factions of people who wouldn't train with each other because they either did parkour or freerunning."

When speaking to some friends after this video was released, they said, "What is Jimmy talking about? It was never that deep."

This is true for many cities. Living in some areas throughout this era, you could easily be insulated from the whole debacle if you weren't engaging online too much. In Brighton, we regularly had thirty people attend the Saturday jams. Everyone trained however they pleased without division or judgment. However, this wasn't the same everywhere.

In an *Evolve Move Play* podcast, Michael "Frosti" Zernow from Tempest tells a story of a fight breaking out. Yes, it was an actual fistfight over parkour and freerunning. In 2006, Frosti, Sébastien Foucan, and others were touring and performing on stage with Madonna for her *Confessions* tour. Between shows, a jam was held at Central Park in New York for everyone to come together and train with the illustrious Foucan. Many people from New York and the surrounding areas attended to take advantage of the rare opportunity to hear firsthand some words of wisdom from one of the founders. During a speech, there was a point when Foucan gathered his eager listeners together and had them put their hands in the middle. (An adorable image.) He said something to the effect of, "Remember, we do this for love, this is a way to express yourself and to explore your environment, and there's no point talking bullshit on the internet. That's not going to help anyone, and it won't help you."

Frosti recalls how the speech was interrupted by a commotion in the background. Two guys were engaged in a heated argument about whether one of them was a freerunner or a traceur. One was adamant he was a traceur, and the other guy retorted, "No way, man! We saw you doing side flips at Battery Park! Just say you're a freerunner!"

Then, the "traceur" punches the other guy in the face. All the while, one of the originators is a few feet away, telling everyone that

the parkour and freerunning debate is purely online bullshit that doesn't matter.

In recent years, Foucan has repeatedly stated that he regrets creating freerunning as a distinct offshoot of parkour, calling it a "big mistake." However, he could not have anticipated that people's obsession with categorisation would be taken to such lengths and endure for so long. As he initially expressed, freerunning better represented a large portion of the founders' training. I put equal blame on David for applying limiting, inflexible utility values to the word *parkour*. By defining parkour as he did – so rigid and utilitarian – he created a space that needed to be filled.

Chapter 9 - The Dilution of the Copycats

In this period, the happy-go-lucky misfits who weren't too concerned about efficiency and being strong to be useful carried on as usual. Unbothered by the narrative of giving their practice an ulterior higher purpose, they simply cracked on honing their movement skills. While many focused on executing single flips off bins and electrical boxes onto grass, others continued to integrate flips alongside developing more parkour-related skills. This just happened to involve ticking off all the vaults one by one, jumping off high surfaces, hucking various flips, and borrowing moves from tricking. These carefree vagabond freerunners, with their bright and colourful Urban Freeflow *graphic* shirts, goofy 3Run sweatbands, and cool dude spiky gelled hair, dominated the spectacle and shaped the overall public's perception of the sport. Yet, despite this reality, they had absolutely no tech!

The Early Arms Race

Parkour spread worldwide following David Belle's BBC *Rush Hour* commercial, *Jump London* and *Jump Britain*, but the UK became the world's hub of innovation. The UK seemed to be at the steering wheel despite many European backseat drivers. The poor US didn't get their act together for a long time to come, aside from a select few.

In 2005, user-generated media platforms like Dailymotion, Google Video and YouTube hit the scene. All the hungry new guns had a whole backlog of videos at their fingertips to watch, emulate and build upon. And since anyone could suddenly upload, everyone could now easily add to the global parkour hive mind—stacking innovation upon innovation. This was revolutionary. The community could now connect by other means than the dodgy forums with video download links that would incapacitate the family computer for hours. But at the time, the focus often seemed to be on the quantity of moves rather than the quality. In other words, what mattered to many people was how many vaults and flips you could do and to what high

scales you could push them, rather than how clean and polished the technique was. It was an arms race, moving into new and uncharted territory on fertile ground, often even farther beyond what the French founders had managed. What could go wrong, you ask?

As we all know, parkour can be harsh on the body. Some abrupt forces we submit our bodies to are likely higher than in any other sport. Many people simply weren't discerning enough to understand that copying the sort of drops they saw in David Belle's *Speed Air Man* video in their first month of training might not be the best idea for the health of their joints. But who could blame them? Seeing what these Frenchmen were doing undoubtedly got me hyped to leng myself off the highest thing I could manage. I certainly did my fair share of ugly height drops.

It certainly indicates a naive arrogance, assuming you can do what people have trained for a decade to achieve in your first week. Imagine jumping into the deep end with other dangerous sports such as supermoto racing, freeride skiing, or wingsuiting. It would be silly to hop in an F1 car and attempt to rag it around a track after only having driven a Nissan Micra around Slough. However, many tried to copy the large height drops they'd seen, where you practically let gravity do the work until you smack down to the ground. The entry level was low, and the reward was high. But the consequences... sometimes cartilage-crumbling.

A Feed from the Predecessors

Julie Angel's 2006 documentary, *Le Singe est de Retour* (The Monkey's Back), was a prominent piece of media for some at the time. It was another rare long-form parkour documentary that provided a window into the pioneers' training methods. It follows one of David's first protégés, Stephane Vigroux, around Lisses and Évry, where he trains and talks about the early days of parkour and what it was like to train under his mysterious mentor. He shed some light on the early virtues they maintained. In one scene, Vigroux explains, "There are two important things: the touch (the sensitivity) and the physical condition."

Touch and sensitivity mean to land lightly and with control. He speaks a lot about repetition and its importance for solidifying technique and physical capacity before moving on to larger, potentially destructive challenges. He explains how, at the time, elsewhere in the world, the way people were training was "too much, too fast and too much show." He speaks of the importance of learning to walk before you can run. (The video also may have inspired the super XL baggy track pants phase our community suffered through for a long time.)

These ideas seeped into the minds of those who were willing to listen. However, there were also already a few key figures in that period who helped promote control and a body-conserving mentality through their words and videos.

Blane the Meticulous

Chris Rowat (AKA Blane), originally from Leicester, UK, is among those who started training the very next day after Jump London aired in September 2003. However, he didn't just watch it. He was the type of person who recorded it on VHS, rewatched it repeatedly, studied every move intently, and then tried to replicate it. He was naturally meticulous in his training. He was, in essence, a bit of a nerd. He paid close attention to the bits and pieces of the founders' work scattered around the web, whilst also being an active member of the *parkour.net* forum. This is a man who embodied *'be strong to be useful'* to such great lengths that he joined London's fire brigade in 2018.

In April 2006, he made a video called *"Power is Nothing Without Control,"* showcasing finesse and strength in fundamental parkour moves alongside some gnarlier, scarier stuff. Rowat not only pushed the boundaries with some of his movements, but his technique, touch, and overall control were spotless compared to most others at the time.

He told me his leanings towards this approach were because he tends to get wrapped up in the details and enjoys doing stuff "the right way". It was natural for him to focus on landing correctly and prioritising quality. A small but growing number of people around

that time influenced this style. Upon seeing Angel's documentary, *Le Singe est de Retour,* Rowat says it was validation that he was training in line with "the old ways".

Rowat's videos reeled in many views and were celebrated across all the forums. Each release set a new precedent for technical proficiency with precision, control, and footwork. He was not only landing on rails but also sticking them, which at the time was a rare sight. His videos, *EscApe Artist* and *Excelsior,* significantly impacted how I trained. My brother Sacha and I routinely watched both videos before training. Not only did Rowat influence many people through the way he moved, but his writing also had a phenomenal influence. A few parkour geeks were writing blogs around the time, but Rowat's were by far the most prominent. His insights were fresh, erudite, and well-constructed. Rowat published an article in April 2007, aptly titled *Dilution, in* which he expressed concerns that the reckless, hurried manner in which most seemed to train would ultimately lead the community hurtling toward chronic injury. It highlighted that parkour is best practised as a long, worthwhile campaign rather than a short, epic battle—a marathon rather than a quick sprint. (Figuratively, I should clarify. A marathon of parkour would suck!)

> "The best way to get respected in the parkour community today seems to be doing the biggest and best things with the minimum amount of training to get there. As long as you do it, it doesn't matter how sloppy it was, how slow the climb up was, how precise the landing was or how much damage it did to the person. People are doing things to be recognised by others, and it's tough for the people working hard and progressing steadily to see this happening around them."

Although this last point may stem from a smidge of insecurity about their comparative skill level, the article as a whole was out of sincere concern for the future of parkour. Rowat went on to compare the founders to the current state of the new wave:

> "Various interviews with David have all asked about injuries, and David has shaken his head and said his knees are fine, his arms are fine, and he has no pain. This is after 18 years of training. By contrast, today, we have guys with one year of training behind them taking months out with knee problems, shoulder dislocations, tendinitis... surgery to repair the body before 20 years of age. Is this a coincidence? Or is this because we are pushing too hard, too fast, trying to be the best and compare to others?" The French pioneers "have deep-rooted 'grandad strength' and resilience and resistance to injury that comes from gradual progression."

When I first read Rowat's *Dilution* in my first year of training, I understood it to some extent, but I thought the idea of the dilution of our sport was a bit far-fetched. That was until around September of that same year, when my friend Craig Teale, whom I started training with, began experiencing knee problems.

Chondromalacia

Craig started in March 2006, six months before Sacha and me, and he was already a tank by the time we started. However, his first year of training reflected the worst-case scenario of what Chris Rowat described in his article.

I'd known Craig since our first year of primary school, and he was always exceptional in every sport he played. He was fiercely competitive and gave his all to everything he did. As teenagers, we played brutal games in the park and school playground. In a game of manhunt, Craig was the last kid to be caught, and everyone had him cornered at the very top of a tall tree. That tree was Craig's tree, and he knew his way around it better than anyone in our school. As people climbed to catch him, he threw hefty pine cones down at them to ward them off despite being hopelessly cornered.

Another game we played was called *Beat the Letter*. Feel free to try this one at home, kids! You have two teams, the runners and the beaters. Everyone on the runners' team had a letter, and the beaters' goal was to extract that letter from them by any means necessary to form the secret word. Predominantly through physical means—hence

the name *Beat the Letter*. (At that age, we hadn't entirely developed the proper cognitive abilities for psychological, verbal coercion for a nonviolent method of letter extraction. However, if we had, it would have likely been verbal abuse aimed squarely at low-hanging sensitive insecurities, such as not yet having pubes. Wasn't school wonderful?) In the park one evening, Craig again was the last to be caught, and when he was, he was thoroughly kicked the shit out of for a good while before surrendering his letter. In school one day, one game ended with Craig's cousin, John Teale, breaking an arm. As you can imagine, it was quickly banned when the headteacher found out.

Shortly before we discovered parkour, Craig and Chris Brooks were always top dons when we played *the wood game* at the playground, which was basically floor-is-lava tag. They were consistently the last to be caught, even when about twenty other kids were playing, because of their determination and natural ability to jump and move around better than everyone else.

Of course, Craig pushed as hard as possible after finding parkour. In his first year, he sought out the most horrendous height drops and layout backflips off twelve-foot walls. His training style matured after his first year of training and meeting others in the Brighton community. Everything remained large-scale, but he now placed a strong emphasis on control. For example, he was among the first to do the cat pass-to-arm jump over the subway drop at IMAX 2, and the cat pass precision down over the walkway at IMAX 1. This was back when the walls were still painted orange. His 2007 video showcased huge technical moves performed with textbook technique, along with some massive layout backflips, as old habits die hard.

He was set to be one of the greats, and I honestly think that if he continued, he'd be a household name. But alas, Craig was diagnosed with severe Chondromalacia patellae in late 2007. This meant his knees' cartilage had deteriorated beyond repair, and he reluctantly stopped training due to debilitating pain. Despite his most arduous efforts, along with a helping hand from a little HGH from a local gym bro, he was unable to rehabilitate it.

Around this time, I knew a few others stricken with patellar tendinopathy and Osgood-Schlatter's disease (swelling and inflammation at the soft cartilage growth plate where the patellar

tendon meets the top of the tibia). Although not an overuse issue, Chris Brooks also dislocated his knee on a janky side flip in 2009. So, for me at the time, witnessing Craig, Chris and other friends dropping like flies with all manner of maladies, there was plenty of evidence, left, right and centre, that Chris Rowat's prophetic words may have been accurate.

Stories like Craig Teale's were abundant in that period. It's important to understand the mentality of many of these gung-ho newcomers before condemning them. I think everyone was taking something different from what they saw online at the time. Different aspects resonated with different people. And, of course, it still does today. Someone like Chris Rowat will be attracted to other elements of parkour than someone like Oleg Vorslav, Victor Lopez, Gaëtan Bouillet or Chase Armitage (again, that is indeed his real name). The issue arose because we were all watching each other, making this new sport grow exponentially into uncharted waters. Some people's ideologies and preferences conflicted with those of others. Regardless, most of us wanted to keep doing it for as long as possible. At the time, even after training only for a year, I couldn't imagine a worse fate than that which had befallen my friend, Craig. And a combination of all these things undoubtedly caused me and others to switch up our antics. On the *Swapping Shoes* podcast, even the flamboyant freerunning prince, Jason Paul, states that he was scared into doing hours of repetitions to drill good technique and build his 'suit of armour' because of Chris Rowat's Dilution article. All in all, new respect had been earned for some of the meticulous, origins-obsessed parkour crowd.

Chapter 10 - The Slow Convergence

A few of Chris Rowat's friends in Cambridge had been promoting the same meticulous training style. Owen Covill and Julian 'Jin' Donovan were big proponents of control and refined technique. They were two of the most adept at pushing the scale of the fundamentals and applying them in challenging ways. The Cambridge Traceurs Blogspot reads, "Do not constantly put demands on your joints by doing big jumps and drops. Train the small things often so your body becomes strong enough to do the bigger things. Train your techniques over, over, and over."

Seeing what these two accomplished, it was hard not to take heed and follow suit. For example, you wouldn't be able to find anyone pushing cat passes to distances they were doing between 2005 and 2006. Perhaps, except for Paul Joseph (AKA Blue), despite his shin-splintering two-footed block take-off being so knee-shatteringly hard that he could cause an earthquake.

PhilyDee

Through these two iconic figures, a young, chubby, annoying kid emerged who would grow up to dominate the scene and influence the rest of the parkour world. Phil Doyle was a kid, essentially raised by Owen and Jin from an early age. Doyle was a young runt with talent. He started in 2005 after, by chance, seeing Owen and Jin's friend, Jason Matten, do a backflip whilst on a family holiday in France. Phil got Owen and Jin's contact details from Jason, and then they wouldn't hear the end of him on MSN Messenger for the following year, constantly hounding them, asking when and where they were going to train. From his videos in 2006, it was already clear that this runt had solid potential after scarcely a year of practice. It was evident that Phil had the virtues of control drummed into him through Jin and Owen's influence. His early videos exhibited clear

proficiency with precisions, sticking rails from standing jumps, and rail cat passes to precisions, which were big for the time. Along with some outrageous shoulder-wrenching body drop laches and other big swings. Owen and Jin had certainly found their protégé.

By September 2007, Phil became a household name with his video, *Barefootdem Foolish Blaps!* (If you go looking for this video, I beg you to play it with its original song, *The Roots - Don't Say Nuthin*. YouTube, at the time, was cracking down on copyrighted music, and instead of muting the video entirely, it gave you the option to pick a replacement song from a database of royalty-free trash. Phil picked one at random, and it pales in comparison.)

Around this period, it is said that Phil would often head out to train without taking his shoes. Imagine being a member of the public and seeing a bowl-cut 14-year-old kid in dirty track pants and dirtier bare feet walking the streets of Cambridge with a carton of Ribena in hand. While most other kids that age are just looking for fights or stuff to burn, little Phil was busying himself to become the archetype for our sport's next generation. Not that it was his intention. This barefoot video was three and a half minutes of movement that most of the community wouldn't have been able to do at the time, except that Phil was doing it all without shoes. It had rail precisions and strides at height, a cat pass to crane to a thin bollard, a huge drop rail precision, and a sizeable tic tac to arm jump that would strip the layman's foot of its top few layers of skin. It also featured challenging climbs, swings, and a run in a giant tree, as seen in Owen and Jin's old videos, although Phil was doing it almost twice as fast—AND barefoot. And, much to some purists' bemusement, the video had one singular side flip.

The video deservedly amassed a lot of views. However, barefoot parkour videos oddly tended to. It can be hard to gauge how many views came from either parkourists or foot fetish creeps. Another barefoot video from Teige Matthews-Palmer, titled *Meow*, from 2007, now has 63,000 views, while his other videos from that time got under 10k. You might assume that these are both simply coincidences. But wait! My brother, Sacha, uploaded a video in 2008 called *Barefoot Garden Training*, which received thousands of views, whereas his other videos only got hundreds. Some comments read,

"Next time, it would be cool to see how scratched up and dirty your feet get after doing this." Sure enough, the profiles of this commenter's favourites playlist were exclusively foot videos. Some with men dressed as builders sucking each other's toes and giggling. I'm not trying to kink shame, but bear in mind that Sacha was twelve years old at the time! So if you're in the business of getting views above all else, why not make some videos whoring out your feet for weirdos?!

Either way, Phil Doyle's video, despite whatever percentage of views may have been from boy-hungry foot fetish paedophiles, was still undoubtedly iconic in the parkour world. These chaps in Cambridge had spawned a demon, and they were all setting the standard for the rest of the traditional parkour camp, much of which was likely still faffing about doing push-ups while watching *Speed Air Man* and wishfully thinking, "One day."

Joy Breaks the Barrier

I'm acutely aware that we've veered from the parkour and freerunning topic and are mainly following down the avenue of the purist/anti-flips side. There's a good reason for this. What is interesting is the period where the two began to converge once again, and the barriers between them became hazier. There is one video in particular that I feel was largely responsible for dampening the divisive notion that parkour and freerunning were opposing forces. That video was *Cambridge Joy*.

At the time, many of the videos were very showy and self-promotional. They were either action reels of individuals or teams, cut together with some cheesy epic Matrix-style music, and in many instances, cliché sound bites from The Matrix were inserted. The number of videos edited to the song *Clubbed to Death* by Rob Dougan from the Matrix soundtrack was embarrassing. Cambridge Joy broke that stale template with a feel-good Fort Minor tune and a light feel. It was a jam video featuring people from around the UK training together in Cambridge. It featured Daniel Ilabaca, Owen Covill, Julian Donovan, Jak Lowry, Phil Doyle, Alex Watts, Joe Parker, Guy

Lawrence and Chase Armitage (yes, that's his real name; get over it!). It's also possible to spot a young gangly Scott Bass. (Fun fact: Guy Lawrence, the kid chomping on a leaf in the video, created a platinum album with his brother Howard. You may know them as Disclosure, the artists who wrote the inescapable club banger *White Noise*.) There was plenty of cutting-edge movement, including a hefty reverse vault to arm jump by Daniel Ilabaca, which remains incredible today and has only been repeated by a couple. However, the video didn't have the played-out, self-congratulatory, up-its-own-arse, serious feel. It had a lot of wisecrack comments and general bullshit, such as Guy chomping on a leaf. As a viewer, you felt that it was just a training day. It showcased some of the best in the game at both traditional parkour-centric stuff and more freerunning-centric stuff—one harmonious amalgamation of happy-go-lucky misfits with mutual respect for each other's movement. The video was shot and edited by Daniel's brother, Chris Ilabaca. The two brothers continued to produce videos with similar vibes, and all were hits within the community. The video style quickly caught on.

Something must have clicked between Daniel and Phil because Phil was heavily featured in all of the Ilabacas' videos that followed. They massively influenced each other in how they moved, viewed challenges, and conquered fear.

Ilabaca

As mentioned in a previous chapter, Daniel Ilabaca began training in the early 2000s before hearing the term parkour and knowing it was being practised elsewhere. There is a short 2002 documentary featuring Daniel (pre-Jump London) in which he claims that what he and his friends were doing was called "urban monkeys." He was always inspired to move around his hometown, Moreton, a suburb of Liverpool. The documentary showcases a very young Daniel performing impressive roof gaps for the time and a massive gainer off the famous pavilion roof, alongside interviews with his mum, nan, uncle, and a concerned local policeman. From a young age, he had been influenced by Jackie Chan's and others' films. He told me he

used to sneak out to follow his brothers to play in the crate yards, a vast area filled with stacks of hundreds of wooden pallets, and dressing up as ninjas and stealthily clambering about on rooftops at night.

Daniel's area was pretty rough, and he was headed down a rough path with some rough friends. His brother Chris tells a great story about when Daniel was eleven or twelve years old and got some unwanted attention after a previous scrap with another scouse scallywag. When his father, Max, opened the door to the group out louts, they said they wanted a tussle, and Max called Daniel to come downstairs to sort them out. Little Danny bombed it out and did a jump, clearing the porch space and front garden and flying drop-kicked one of the lads square in the chest. But later in his teens, seeing a capoeira practitioner named Jeff perform a wall flip was enough to set him on an entirely different trajectory.

Ilabaca joined Jeff and another named JP (who went on to create Liverpool's Airborn Academy with Martin Tsang) for a Capoeira-style class at a recreation centre. These guys were simply hyped to replicate some of the stuff they saw in a martial arts film called *Only the Strong*. Later, he'd see a video online of Yamakasi's 2001 featurette on *Ripley's Believe It or Not,* which is when he realised other people were also doing what he was.

After seeing Daniel's first videos, it was clear to everyone that he was an anomaly. His videos featured huge flips and jumps, showcasing a lot of confidence with high rooftop stuff. In his video, *Daniel Ilabaca - London 2006,* he practically destroyed IMAX. He stuck the cat pass precision down across the footpath at IMAX 1 twice and hit a few firsts, including the dive cat pass over the subway at IMAX 2 from stepping up on the first wall. Along with accruing many firsts for parkour movement at famous London spots, he sent a double backflip onto the sand at Festival Pier earlier that year. In 2006, he also made his pilgrimage to Lisses, where he demolished many iconic challenges from the founders' videos with ease and finesse.

On April 15th 2007, the world saw its first kong gainer. Daniel stomped the move that nobody was even close to attempting, and some hadn't even imagined being a possibility. His first time doing it

was outside, on grass, from the pavilion roof. And it was executed perfectly. Completely straight, with not one degree of off-axis slant to the rotation, followed by a perfect roll on landing. In a video released precisely a week later called *Another Day Of Fun,* he did it again, but from the top railing at Festival Pier on London's Southbank.

Ilabaca was regarded as a force of nature, setting new and unattainable standards above the ordinary mortal of the time in both parkour and freerunning. But he didn't buy into the whole senseless divide between parkour and freerunning. He did what was challenging simply because it pushed him.

Of course, when Ilabaca met Doyle, there was magic in the air, and they both bounced off each other incredibly. In my opinion, this magic worked as a remedy for the general community's petty online squabbles.

Over the next few years, Chris Ilabaca made more videos similar to the vibe of *Cambridge Joy*, like *New Years Eve Eve* (which was the time Sacha and I crawled out of our Brighton hole and finally trained with the people we had admired in videos for ages), *Reach for the Sky, Eve Eve Day of London Funjoy, Year of 2008, Take My Strong Hand, Episode Water Sports* and others. Over time, as this style of video caught on, more and more people around the world seemed to care less and just wanted to get good at performing scary, aesthetic, and challenging movement. Regardless of how you felt inclined to move, the conversation became less relevant. Even a few purists could be seen shedding their traditionalist straightjackets and learning to webster front.

Russia and Eastern Europe (Out of Time)

While all this was happening, many noteworthy individuals and teams around the globe were pushing the field of flips and tricks. Videos from 3Run, Tempest and Speeders became staples. However, the Russians and Eastern Europeans quickly became the ones to watch. Out of nowhere, double flips and kong gainers abruptly became commonplace in these far-flung, rugged communities. The rest of the community watched on in amazement as considerable

leaps in acrobatic skills and unseen moves were developed exponentially on the most rugged, dilapidated obstacles and neglected, deteriorating post-Soviet housing estates. Videos provided a window into their world of rust-riddled workout bar parks, steep sand hills, and tall snow piles, all of which were their iconic proving grounds. It was common to see videos of tuck-and-hope triple flips into snow piles from multiple storeys up every winter. The poorly maintained wobbly bar parks are arguably the most iconic to the Russian parkour image and are responsible for their creative swing lines. (And probably tetanus, too.) Working out on the bars is likely why so many are ridiculously strong. However, this may just be inherent to being Russian, as with their seemingly inhuman pain tolerance. (Or perhaps it's partially due to being irradiated from Chernobyl... They got a small dose of Peter Parker's spider bite.)

These communities seemed insulated in general. Especially from the petty parkour and freerunning quarrels, whether due to the language barrier or the fact that their foremost communal hub was VK instead of Facebook or other forums, or perhaps because they simply couldn't care less. These partially separated communities seemed content in their bubble, ploughing on revolutionising movement in relative isolation. So much of today's level is owed to the progress made in this era by these regions, known for their creativity, borderline insanity, and often self-disregarding drive to launch the most heinous rotations from high platforms and bars. There was a period where, if anyone naively claimed to have invented a new trick, you could almost guarantee someone from Russia or Eastern Europe had already done it.

The heights at which they often performed were not commonly seen at the time. Roof gaps were common everywhere, but you'd rarely see anyone pushing it above fifteen storeys. As you can imagine, the underfunded post-Soviet housing blocks often had easy rooftop access. In a JamCast episode, Erik Mukhametshin mentions how you can get onto rooftops in Russia by pulling the locked door as hard as possible until the rusted lock breaks. Some seemed utterly fearless, even in the face of death. More recently, in 2019, a video went viral of Sergey Shorokhov striding across sheet metal-covered corner ledges of a tall building until – apparently having not checked

the route beforehand – two radio wires abruptly materialised in front of him, clotheslining him above the 25-storey drop, and he clutches onto the cables for dear life, momentarily suspended in thin air. He then makes a desperate scramble along the wires – which could have snapped under his weight at any moment – to lunge for the sheet metal edge, where he pulls himself up to safety, escaping with only burns to his stomach and hands from the poorly insulated radio wires.

It came with little surprise, although not without deep sadness, when the news hit the community that the first officially confirmed parkour death was Russian. In 2013, Saint Petersburg's Pavel Kashin attempted a backflip precision on the side of a 16-storey building, lost his balance to the right on landing and fell to his death. When Googling his name, you can find a haunting photo of the backflip a second before the fatal fall.

In many cases, much of the movement was scrappy as they seemed not to have the highest standard for success and style; if you landed the flip, you landed the flip. In Jason Paul's video *How "crazy Russians" took Parkour to the next level*, he reflects on how "The stereotype became that, in Russia, if your technique was not good enough to land a trick, say, if you can't make it all the way around on a double backflip, the solution to the problem was not to work on your technique. Instead, the preferred method seemed to be to just jump from a higher place until you eventually land the trick."

In this early period, it seemed the focus was on big, ballsy single moves and tricks rather than lines and combos.

Oleg Vorslav from Daugavpils, Latvia, released a video that would not only reshape the Russian and Eastern bloc's outlook on freerunning but also influence the entire global community. In 2009, Vorslav's *Out of Time* created shockwaves across the scene with its perfectly hybridised creativity. The fourteen-minute masterpiece incorporated long, technical, and elaborate winding swing lines, unpredictable creative rail-flow lines, rail-running, and break dancing on the same rusty blue exercise bar park. Some gnarly roof gaps were mixed in, including the coolest 540 reverse vault roof gap you'll ever see. It could be seen as the first true example of the unadulterated creative freedom that parkour can encompass. This video acted as an

invitation for everyone to get weird with it. *Out of Time* inevitably spawned more hyper-stylish creative visionaries, perhaps most notably Alexander Gisych (AKA Shade Zlat) from Zlatoust, Russia, and Stanislav Lazdans and Pavel Petkuns (AKA Pasha), both from Daugavpils, the same Latvian city as Oleg Vorslav.

Many revolutions in movement have expanded people's *parkour vision* to new worlds of possibilities over the years. Recent examples include pole slides, chimney slides, off-axis flips, and large splats with height drops. Another, as mentioned, was from *Parkour, Imaginatively*. However, Oleg's *Out of Time* may be the most significant revolutionary turning point. The skill tree of parkour and freerunning suddenly expanded, sprouting several new branches, which only laid the foundation for several future branches to grow from those branches. For anyone more inclined to freerunning, a door had been pried open to a less rigid, far more expressive and playful stylistic standard. Beyond this, more and more traditional parkour zealots were pushed out of their box and began experimenting with replicating elements of what Oleg and others were producing. It was difficult not to with how cool it all looked. I remember becoming an avid fan of Shade Zlat after being somewhat unmoved by most prior freerunning videos. So much of freerunning before this pivotal moment was either single-move platform tricks with a predictable ceiling of adding more rotations. Or haphazard jumps and vaults with flips thoughtlessly wedged into a line. It was easy for the traditionalists to disregard it as a crude, unrefined tangent of parkour, deliberately designed as a spectacle. But when this new style erupted, involving far more creative and aesthetic thought for interacting with obstacles, it slowly seeped into the movement of fervent trad parkourists. At the very least, if they weren't inspired to try, it earned their respect and was no longer scoffed at. Creative wings were spread as the guard lowered, and the lines continued to blur.

The Dust Settles

At jams, you could more commonly see people merrily having a blast with one another. The parkour vs freerunning squabbles regressed to

the deep recesses of the forums and Reddit. And a few freerunners miraculously adopted a passable precision landing technique, creating a few double-edged-sword athletes. Although the US still needed more time to crack that chestnut.

In the 2010s, flips became more complex and were applied to obstacles in increasingly varied ways. The increasing popularity of flip precisions in this period may be the most significant factor in blurring the divide. Rather than being relatively self-contained, with relatively low obstacle interaction – such as wall tricks, platform tricks, and bar tricks – we saw rapid progression as people pushed flip precisions to increasingly thin and high obstacles. As early as 2008, rather than just launching themselves over gaps with side flips and front flips, Ben Jenkin and Scott Jackson were seen doing front precisions. The first running gainer precision by Dirk Emmerich in 2009 sent shockwaves through the community, despite the landing ledge being only at curb height. In 2012, I remember being blown away by Matthias Mayer and what may have been the first perpendicular side precision to a waist-height rail. Then, two years later, Matthias's training partner, Jannis Schauer, stuck a side flip precision to a rail head on. The merging of the aerial awareness of the freerunner and the control and precision of the traceur, combined with a greater degree of obstacle interaction, earned the respect of everyone across the spectrum.

But we're still no closer to a definition for parkour. If anything, this widening of the boundaries made it harder to pinpoint what we were doing. People's crude definition of freerunning at the time (and in most cases still) seemed to be parkour movement, just with flips. Even though, before the term freerunning was coined, all the founders practised flips. If we were so beholden to the strict definitions of each practice, it would have made more sense for the community to side with *freerunning* as the dominant term. And yet, that didn't happen.

Despite Jump London and Jump Britain causing confusion, as the movement spread like wildfire and the divisions began to converge, parkour became a widespread and somewhat dominant term, with David Belle assumed as the competent custodian and captain at the helm. Meanwhile, Yamakasi's term, Art Du Déplacement, seemed left

by the wayside. It was not until the release of the 2006 documentary by Mark Daniels, entitled *Generation Yamakasi,* that the Yamakasi made their case for their philosophy and practice within Art du Déplacement. Despite not mentioning the word parkour, everyone watching by that point was already using the terms parkour and freerunning. It was doubtful that everyone would shake them off in favour of adopting Art du Déplacement as the dominant name, despite small pockets of the community who claim to practice Art du Déplacement (And some still do). Parkour and freerunning, as terms, had already been adopted everywhere, along with their retrofitted, contrasting ideas of efficiency and expression.

Apart from *Generation Yamakasi,* there was little word from any pioneers in the first few years after the 2003 eruption. I'm not sure of the motive behind this radio silence, but the absence of these influential patriarchs to clarify things surely didn't do us any favours. There certainly would have been fewer arguments and confusion if there had been some kind of clear dialogue early on. There were never any of the founders on the main forums, picking up two foam-mouthed keyboard warriors by the scruffs of their necks and telling them that their petty arguments were bullshit before bonking their heads together and forcing them to kiss and make up. The missing father figures in our early development are undoubtedly a major cause of our current identity crisis. If Foucan's little speech at Central Park in 2006 was broadcast to the entire community, instead of only to a handful of parkourists within earshot, it certainly would have done a world of good. The confusion is still widespread; even though we now use parkour as our umbrella term and our sport has spread to encompass all manner of obstacle-based movement, 10,000 people in my Instagram poll agreed with the antiquated, bogus Wikipedia definition. The more time went on, and parkour and freerunning evolved in our hands, the less the founders' words would have any impact when they eventually came out of hiding, even by the time Parkour Generations was established by Dan Edwardes and Francois Mahop alongside Stephane Vigroux, with the help of some of the Yamakasi. The most popular gatherings Parkour Generations hosted were the annual Rendezvous, a weekend of workshops often led by the Yamakasi and Les Traceurs. Yet their appeal seemed limited to the

most conservative quadrupedie enthusiast subcommunities. By the time they attempted to jump on the train of our now-vast community with coaching, workshops, and seminars, we had mostly moved on. When the community already had new, talented figureheads leading the charge, the founders quickly became a Jurassic relic, with their seemingly archaic outlook and outdated skill set. The new internet phenoms became new idols, such as Daniel Ilabaca, Phil Doyle, Oleg Vorslav, and Chase Armitage (Again, his real name). Because our sport evolved so quickly, our pioneers became dinosaurs in their time of absence. Most of us today don't even know their names and would fail to recognise them if we passed them in the street.

Who knows, in retrospect, they might have done things differently if given a chance to play it out again. Perhaps they would have been there for their wayward and whimsical children. Maybe they would have steered us on a different path. Perhaps in some cases, we were a lost cause no matter what.

Untangling the Identity Crisis

We now have a greater understanding of how this practice emerged and how the founders practised similarly. We now know that, with some help from his acting mentor, David coined the term parkour to distinguish himself from the Yamakasi and supposedly to align his practice more closely with his father's. We know that our freer, expressive, and stylistic idea of freerunning was later attributed to the new term in Jump Britain, even though its initial intention was merely to create an understandable English-sounding rebrand (and for marketing). We've seen how the founders and the activity were divided when it spread to the rest of the world, despite coming from the same place with similar intentions. We've seen how a simple idea with no official name suddenly ended up with three, driven by the need for media recognition, commercial gain, or simply to differentiate opposing groups. We've seen how the divide between names and the initially loose ideas associated with them separated the practice and the blooming worldwide community. Then, we saw how the lines between the once-disparate factions gradually blurred

over time due to various influences, making it increasingly difficult to draw a clear distinction.

Today, the terms parkour and freerunning are used interchangeably, depending on who's talking or to whom. However, for whatever reason, the umbrella term "parkour" seems to dominate in most communities. The community broadly accepts that parkour and freerunning are practically the same, or at least share more in common than they differ.

The main remnants of the divide are the use of the terms to describe an athlete, a style, or a move. For example, "Shane Griffin's style is such pure parkour." Or "A wall flip is more of a freerunning move." Or "Archie Aroyan's style is way more freerunning than traditional parkour, but he's still sick at the fundamental parkour stuff when he isn't unimaginatively linking ledge tricking with lazy vaults and speed steps." Or even, "Alex Schauer's style used to be such a perfect hybrid blend of parkour and freerunning, except now he only makes weird and lame comedy sketch videos which rarely hit their mark and instead just makes what we do look like a big joke...."

An example I find funny is when someone with a more flip-based style says, "I've been working way more on parkour recently." Given the context, we know what they mean, even though we generally call the sport *parkour*. They're saying rather than only doing flip-based lines, they're focusing more on jumps, swings and vaults—which some also call *the fundamentals*. But without foreknowledge of the old ideological divisions, it may sound very strange.

On top of this, it's considered a spectrum rather than clear-cut lines of what parkour is and what freerunning is. Whether seeming more on the traditional parkour side of the spectrum or not, the intention generally stays the same: to get good at moving in the way you enjoy. I believe only the tiniest handful of parkourists training more on the traditional parkour side today claim that their speed training is in preparation for an emergency reach-or-escape scenario. It's far more likely to be for competition. And, likely, for those who make that claim, their training will not resemble Teige Matthews-Palmer's movement in his iconic videos, *Rage Froobling* and *Jangerary*, which I have argued are the closest examples of efficient A-to-B movement outside of competition. Skills like kong precisions, where

you stick the landing, are the last things you'll need or want to use in an emergency. Drilling that and other similar challenges over and over is maybe the least practical use of your time if you intend to prepare for a vast array of obstacles that may occur in a dire situation. Especially where you're under pressure and have no time to check the distance or your landing from a blind run-up at a sprinting pace. If preparing for emergency scenarios is genuinely their goal, it may be a more valuable use of their time to get good at cross-country running, sprinting, hot-wiring cars, driving, fighting, and, if they have time, a few wall runs with a snappy climb-up and some general climbing skills.

I'm saying that most of us today weren't drawn to parkour because we felt a burning need to be equipped for all situations life might one day throw at us. It's undeniably a handy byproduct and may have helped a few climb through a first-floor bathroom window when we've misplaced our front door keys. Still, if we're honest, we were more attracted to it because what seemingly inhuman people did in videos and films looked sick. We stumbled upon a practice that verged on stuff like Spider-Man, The Matrix and Jackie Chan. We saw the incredible abilities of regular people in videos doing extraordinary movements we've never seen before. Only afterwards did some of us assign ideas and preferences to align with what's seen as *pure*, then shape their training around aspects that suited what they could do, or a dogmatic reason to avoid what they were too scared to learn—flips. If you check the comments on the video *Parkour, Literally*, you'll find people praising Quentin for not doing flips. The same goes for the *Parkour, imaginatively* video.

Why was it righteous and commendable not to go upside-down for some? Even though the latter video, without anyone going upside down, featured minimal direct, efficient movement, it was imaginative and playful, with arbitrary, challenge-based lines and moves. I'm unsure how much of the commenters' righteousness was based on genuine belief or how much on sheer insecurity from their inability to do flips. Perhaps it was purely a matter of aesthetics and taste—they simply preferred watching that "style" from an artistic standpoint. But then, surely if it's primarily artistic taste, doesn't that mean that fast, A-to-B, traditional parkour movement is no different

than other styles of movement where aesthetics and expression are more overtly the intention? Maybe it was simply the notion that performing flips, spins, and flamboyant stylised moves is purely ego-driven and for show-offs, as if the same case can't be made about performing anything else without a flip. Perhaps it was sheer tribalism and the narcissism of small differences. Either way, it was just annoying.

By now, I hope we have a clearer understanding of all the historical components that have led to our identity crisis. However, there is still some critical ground we need to cover before untangling this mess and arriving at a new definition we can all agree on. Some of that ground requires addressing our endless obsession with language, labels, and categories.

Chapter 11 - Word Games

As parkour and its practitioners' movement base grew beyond what was visibly utilitarian, for some reason, we didn't ditch the term parkour and switch to freerunning. Parkour remained the dominant term despite the practice veering further from David Belle's traditional utilitarian ideas. As time goes on and the lines continue to blur, the term *freerunning* may become completely redundant. Freerunning, as a word, is hanging on by the thread that is its use as a purely descriptive word, designating movement or movers on the spectrum of traditional parkour or freestyle parkour. And even then, in time, we may adopt *style parkour* or *freestyle parkour* for that purpose instead.

In 2025, Max Henry made a thought-provoking video titled "*Should we make parkour more structured?*" in which he argues for formalising separate styles for ease of communication, as skateboarding does with street, vert, and transition. His proposed categories were style parkour, speed parkour, technical parkour, contemporary parkour, micro parkour, traditional parkour, and flow parkour. Freerunning was not mentioned amongst the categories, and what's more, no one batted an eye in the comments. Who knows, at some point, the obsolete term *freerunning* might die altogether. It already feels archaic for many of us. A word survives so long as it's being said. With that in mind, perhaps the more people shouting "PARKOUR" mockingly from a moving car, the better.

Words are Alive

No definition is ever concrete. They are not solidified forever. We must accept that words and language are like living things, constantly morphing at the hands of their users. The meaning of words is cooperatively constructed and maintained by people. Words don't have meanings; they have meaning potential. Words transform based on their generally agreed-upon definitions. Words also come and go

depending on whether they are used or not. New words spring up from different places where it's practical. Categories are constructed in relation to their functional significance—as we've seen with the birth and morphing of the newer compound word, freerunning. Even though useful intention was not the primary focus of what the founders were exploring during the first decade, David Belle later assigned that meaning to parkour, creating an opening for a term with a function that doesn't exclude movement without useful intention. Even without Sébastien Foucan's retrofitted distinction that freerunning is a separate expressive offshoot of parkour, it's not hard to imagine that another term may have been created instead to fill the well-needed opening. I guarantee someone else would have conjured up some other term like *freestyle parkour* simply because David's definition, and all who stayed loyal to it, created a considerable constraint, leaving a gap, forcing people to make up something to categorise themselves and their movement. Conversely, as we may eventually see with *freerunning*, many archaic words that no longer serve a function tend to fade away.

Polari is an example of a lexicon that came and went. Polari was a form of slang adopted by homosexuals (primarily men) in Britain as a way to hide in plain sight. Before the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, Polari served as a coded way to communicate without fear of persecution or imprisonment. It is a mishmash of Italian, Romani, Yiddish, and Cockney rhyming slang, all mixed with English.

An example is "Friend of Dorothy", meaning a gay man. Search on YouTube for *"Putting on the Dish"* for a short film in Polari. For anyone overhearing a conversation who wasn't privy to the parlance, it could sound like a couple of normal cockney 'lemon-squeezers' having a proper old chinwag. And if adept, it could sound like a different language altogether. It was adopted out of necessity, and then when that necessity evaporated in the 1970s, due to it then becoming legal to exist as a homosexual, the dialect also evaporated. Although there are still commonly used remnants in the English language, such as drag, camp, butch, khazi, scarper, dish, mince, and naff.

Alternatively, words can remain despite losing their initial associations. In film, *footage* was used to refer to the length of film in a camera, for how many feet of tape, but since cameras became digital, the word *footage* survived due to its widespread functionality. The same goes for a director yelling *cut* despite having no film to cut.

One of the most significant shifts in shaping the modern English language occurred after the Norman invasion of England in 1066. With their French dialect, the Normans' ruling class soon merged with the native Saxon peasantry's Old English after hundreds of years of a dual language system. The vocabulary of modern English now includes around 10,000 words of French origin.

In many cases, slang words are only slang until they're not. Just think, someone recently said *"yeet"* or *"rizz"* for the first time somewhere, and now they're both far-reaching, fledgling slang words that even boomers improperly attempt to slide into sentences to relate to their Gen Z kids. The word *cool*, as an adjective describing something as good rather than just cold, was new and informal slang until a couple of generations passed, and it became a ubiquitous positive adjective. The word *terrific* was initially an adjective for something dreadful. Then, about one hundred years ago, it became commonly used for something magnificent, and to use it for something terrible became archaic. That word shifted to mean the opposite of its original meaning. This might remind you of the more recent dualistic adjective, *sick*. *Sick* was only to describe someone either under the weather or utterly depraved. Then, most likely thanks to Californian skate and surf subcultures in the 80s, it's also widely used informally in a positive sense.

The word *cunt* in the US has long been a misogynistic slur. However, in the UK, *cunt* is a gender neutral insult that's separated from its use as a vulgar word for a vagina. And then, there's Australians. Down under, cunt is a beautifully versatile word. As a term of endearment: sick cunt, good cunt, mad cunt, hard cunt, hot cunt, smart cunt. Cunt is used as a neutral placeholder for either *guy*, *mate* or *bloke* in casual conversation, as well as remaining an insult: Shit cunt, absolute cunt, silly cunt, fat cunt, dog cunt, cooked cunt, and just plain old cunt. Context is important. However, much of the LGBTQ+ community has reclaimed it, transforming *cunt* into a high-

praise term. *Cunty* and *serving cunt* both can mean extreme confidence, beauty, and authenticity. It's considered a form of reverse discourse, taking a historically abusive term for marginalised groups and turning it into a badge of honour to build group solidarity and empowerment.

By now, you get the point. Out of the risk of losing 100% of American female readers, I won't continue to bore you further with more examples of the malleability of words and language. So long as we agree that it's ok to change parkour's definition based on how we, as a community, use it. As long as we agree that the word *parkour* and its definition don't belong to its creator, David Belle (his acting mentor, Hubert Koundé, if we want to get technical). Although he may have initially adopted the word, its definition and usage are still in the hands of the many in the community of speakers who use it. And David is but one of those people. And he doesn't even train anymore, so there's that too...

Parkour Language Barrier

Language has long been a source of debate within parkour. Different people certainly put different levels of importance on terms, names and categories. Many of us are pretty OCD about how we categorise and name everything. As we've seen with parkour and freerunning, traceur and freerunner, our community has always been rife with seemingly deliberate, divisive attitudes for sorting people and styles into certain boxes, even to the point of calling them a different sport entirely. You may think this behaviour still exists only on Reddit, but it is also prevalent among normal people. (Yes, I just suggested Redditors are abnormal; I would even go further to say that most of them are cretinous sub-human life forms that are out of touch with the reality beyond their gamer chairs.)

In 2021, Kieran Owen (AKA Jimmy The Giant) released a video about a "new" parkour style named *Monkey style*. I'd say its associated traits include sequences of fast, fluid movement, with abrupt changes in direction. It uses a diverse range of techniques, particularly those

involving both feet and hands, often leading with the hands in an almost monkey-like fashion, hence the name. There's usually no clear and direct A-to-B style route, but rather more like A to B, to C, and many other letters, generally forming a spaghetti-like line rather than a clear and direct linear route through a space. The sequences are often long, winding and unpredictable, with a sprinkle of improvisation.

The video suggested that Orlando Devaux of Team Phat had pioneered this new style. As expected, there was outrage in the comments section. People claimed that many had been training this way for years already. Comments state that Spain's Pedro León Gómez (AKA Phosky) and the others from the Galizian Urban Project were the pioneers. Or Joseph Marx, Luke Albrecht, Matt McCreary, Kelan Ryan, or their mate from a small suburb of Bogota, Colombia. No one cared until someone gave this style a name and a creator. Everyone was rightly confused, as the lines were hazy when the style started and ended. Some of its features and associated moves had been a part of parkour forever. How could you possibly claim it as something new? The problem was people's insistent nature to ruin things by categorising them with language. This is the fault of both the commenters and how Kieran presented it in the video. Instead of being viewed as a new, loose descriptive term for a movement style, Monkey Style was seen as an entirely new phenomenon. And, of course, you're going to incite confusion and debate further by claiming this new phenomenon has a sole pioneer when it's very clearly derived from so many influences that were becoming increasingly abundant in the community at the time. Whether it was new or not, the style depicted in the video was becoming increasingly popular, making it natural for people to assign a new term for it. It was wrong to give the style a pioneer, as, despite Orlando's iteration having some discernible features and his being particularly explosive and aesthetically pleasing, it undoubtedly had myriad identifiable influences. But the term Monkey Style isn't a bad thing. New terms can naturally arise as a form of mental shorthand to demarcate even subtle differences, making communication easier. The definitive weight that so many parkourists seem to attribute to such terms is the problem.

Another example of language causing a stir was when Alfred Scott publicly stated that off-axis kong gainers should instead be called slanted kong gainers—or simply *slants*. Alfred pointed out that doing off-axis kong gainers is easier than doing them straight due to the decreased risk of hitting your head on the take-off wall. Therefore, continuing to call them Kong gainers devalued those executed on a strictly sagittal axis. He made the point that there is an evident scale of difficulty, and we shouldn't be opposed to using language to differentiate between difficult and less difficult.

From my perspective, his argument made some sense. Some people strive to make their movement cleaner and more polished rather than settling for a move or sequence being executed sub-optimally. Good and bad execution is usually measured by aesthetics (which is subjective and down to the eye of the beholder) and how destructive something is on your body (also subjective and down to the load tolerance of the executor). However, the quality of execution shouldn't require a new descriptive term beyond labelling something as less than ideal. A stick doesn't become not a stick because it's imperfect—it's just not a great stick. Although some have jokingly labelled them as 'American sticks'.

Alfred got loads of pushback from people in the community. Needless to say, especially from those who could only do slanted kong gainers, who clearly felt their skills were being discredited. This goes for the many Americans whose precision landings aren't up to par. But I think it just shows how anal some of us can be about language.

Kong vs Catpass

Speaking of kongs. Arguing about the names for fundamental moves is stupid. Anyone spending over 30 seconds arguing whether to use Kong Vault or Cat Pass needs a firm slap upside the head. That being said, allow me to rattle on about just that for the next few pages...

The cat pass originates from the original French term *saut de chat* (cat jump), which Stéphane Vigroux coined during his first few months of training. In a video titled *SV and the SDC*, he explains that

he *discovered* the move while training with David. In David's route, there was a running jump takeoff wall that was too high for Stephane, so he adapted by using his arms to vault in the most direct way. However, he certainly wasn't the first to execute the vault. It had already long been used by gymnasts under the names *squat-through* or *squat-over*, likely unbeknownst to Vigroux. Douglas Fairbanks also performs a beautifully quintessential dive cat pass in the 1920 silent film, *The Mask of Zorro*. The name "*Kong*," or its original name "*King Kong vault*," was later coined by someone from Urban Freeflow around 2003-2004 due to limited online information on terminology. Urban Freeflow was the first UK-based website and forum for parkour. It was created on September 10th 2003—the very day after Jump London first aired. It became the UK's hub for information on all things parkour. *Monkey Vault* was the original Urban Freeflow name, while King Kong Vault was intended for a more dynamic version, such as one with a run-and-dive entry. The guys from Urban Freeflow came up with all sorts of wacky names for moves to fulfil the need to communicate online.

Given the sport's fledgling stage in the UK, much of the focus was on learning the techniques seen in *Jump London* and other videos from first- and second-generation French guys. Due to Urban Freeflow having a bad reputation among some of the purists of the time, mainly due to its cut-throat CEO, Paul Corkery (AKA EZ), some people, likely to spite Urban Freeflow, started using the French terminology that they later discovered after a few had made their pilgrimage to Lisses and Évry and met and trained with some of the founders. People started using *saut de chat, saut de bras, passe-muraille, saut de fond,* and *roulade* instead of the slapdash English terms coined by UF. Can you imagine how pretentious these purists must have sounded? Picture them putting on their best French accent when out training on the high streets of Manchester. It must have been tiring work to be that purist. Just chill out and say cat leap, you pompous knobhead!

It became easier when they translated some of them into English. *Saut de chat* became *cat pass,* and *saut de bras* became *arm jump.* (The jump was replaced by *pass*, as the French word for almost all vaults was *passement*.)

I've mostly been saying "cat pass" because, back in February 2008, my Brighton friends and I happened to get on the same train carriage home as Joe Parker and Guy Lawrence (Mr Disclosure) after training at a big London jam with our online heroes. We chatted about our training day, and I must have mentioned some new *cat* I had done, which was intended to be short for cat leap. And Guy replied something like, "Cat pass or cat leap? We say cat pass and arm jump instead of kong and cat leap because they're the original names." To which I flustered my way through answering, trying not to let them think I was a noob or, even worse, a scabby Urban Freeflow supporter. From that day on, due to the influence of these two figures, whom I viewed as higher up in the parkour in-group pecking order, I became one of the superior ilk who said *"cat pass"* instead of *"kong"*. I needed to be one of the cool guys! And then, of course, most of the people we started hanging around with more often, like Teige Matthews-Palmer, Phil Doyle, Jason Matten, Toby Segar and Joshua Burnett-Blake, also used *cat pass* and *arm jump*. The other Storror guys from Horsham also often trained with Jason Matten, which led them to join the anti-Urban Freeflow cat pass/arm jump clan. I imagine there are other similar stories wherever *cat pass* and *arm jump* are more prevalent.

So, *kong* and *cat leap* stemmed from ignorance of prior French terminology. The *cat pass* and *arm jump* originated from resentment towards Urban Freeflow, a sense of belonging to an in-group, and a perceived purist and elitist superiority. You can expect to hear *"cat pass"* used alongside *"kong"* in various countries and communities with older purist roots, such as Australia, Spain (gato), and Germany (Katze).

Nowadays, it doesn't matter. Say what you want, so long as you're being understood by whom you're speaking to. I switch depending on who I'm talking to and what they say, just to make communication easier, even though everyone knows what I mean. Terminology should remain loose, quick reference, or descriptive rather than divisive and confusing. However, I have no idea how there came to be so many names for parkour's simplest vault: speed step, step vault, safety vault, step through, crack step, and, in Spain, Doyle.

(Fun fact: In Poland, some also call strides Doyle. The man is influential!)

Another bewildering discussion I've come across is the distinction between the *lazy vault* and the *thief vault*; yet another mess initiated by Urban Freeflow's widely adopted early terminology. Lazy vault and thief vault, whether taking off with the leg closer to or further from the obstacle, or from both feet directly head on to the obstacle, all share the features of the hips swivelling over with one hand down, and catching your weight with the other hand before the feet meet the ground. I wrote a Callum Tip stating, "Calling a 'lazy vault' something different depending on what foot you take off from is the second dumbest thing one can do. The first dumbest is arguing about it."

And take a wild guess what occurred in the comment section. Many people fell straight into my trap and argued that there is a distinct difference that warrants different names. Some even made their point in two-part comments, as they maxed out the character allowance for a single comment. As someone who's writing a book on a small and niche sport's small and niche problems and dilemmas, I'm clearly all for discourse in parkour that can often verge on fruitless, but arguing semantics over the difference between two practically identical vaults is the most futile waste of time and brain power I can conceive of. Early on, a distinction may have been more necessary for whatever reason, perhaps similar to *monkey vault* and *king kong vault*. However, monkey vault fell out of use because its function as a distinct term eroded over time, and the community wound up favouring *kong* or *cat pass*. For some reason, the same didn't happen with the lazy vault and the thief vault for some, and they all chimed in with their weak reasoning for why they are functionally different. Some terms serve a necessary function despite being similar; a backflip and a gainer are similar but different enough in execution to warrant separate terms for ease of communication. The same goes for a cork and a krok. Because there is a clear, communally agreed-upon function in these terms, they have remained in use for a long time without issue. As kong and cat pass have a shared function and are both widely used and understood, everyone knows what you mean

when you use the terms, and they both promote ease of communication. However, the lazy vault and the thief vault both appear more murky and, according to my comment section, far less agreed upon.

Language should serve as a tool for communication, not for obfuscation. (I acknowledge the irony of using a more baroque word like *obfuscation* to make this point. As well as using the word *baroque*.) Language should be our friend, not our enemy. It's a good idea not to put too much weight on terminology and words and to keep language descriptive rather than prescriptive and, more importantly, divisive.

Many people in the comments of Max Henry's video on style categories seemed to be on board with his premise. This shows that there is an increasing need for delineating descriptive terms, whether that be for meeting the expectations of students who are more attracted to learning flips rather than be bored senseless having the fundamentals jammed down their necks for twelve weeks straight before having the chance to huck themselves into a foam pit, or for people hiring for commercial shoots being sure they're getting the right parkourist for their needs. Despite most commenters mainly taking issue with Max's proposed names for each category, such as micro parkour, contemporary parkour or technical parkour, a majority seemed to agree that new descriptive terms served a clear function. A few exceptions worried that formalising the language would lead to dividing and boxing in what parkourists practised. I feel that our inclinations toward certain styles run deeper than language alone. These new distinctions, which parkourists certainly feel have a use, have emerged organically as parkour has evolved beyond the low-resolution division of parkour and freerunning. However, they had not been named before, at least not beyond the competition divisions of Skill, Speed and Style. Still, the borders between each style are pretty soft for many parkourists, and there's plenty of crossover. So long as the communal value of curiosity prevails, people will dabble beyond whatever style they most identify with and what others may expect of them. Although Elis Torhall, for example, may identify more as a style parkourist, his curiosity and willingness to push himself in

as many ways as possible will never keep him from trying what's more associated with technical parkour. If we hold these new categories loosely as purely descriptive terms to aid communication, division should not be an issue.

Defining Complex Things

> *We define things in order to be able to communicate, and language is meant to structure thought. But as soon as you define something, you put it in a box—it can no longer be anything else outside of that box. As irrelevant as this can be in many cases, it becomes crucial when we start talking about anything artistic or creative, such as Parkour. A truly open mind has no boundaries, but still needs a structure to build upon. It's like a tree: solidly grounded, yet forever reaching out towards the sky. One must constantly juggle between structure and no structure in order to fully express creativity and spontaneity, and strict definitions have a way of hindering this process.*
>
> -Thomas Couetdic - Skochypstiks interview

I'm sure by now that we can all agree that our current definition is far too narrow for such a broad and far-reaching movement practice. The broad scope of how most people perceive parkour is likely why it's so challenging to define. Defining broad stuff is just really hard. For us, it's perhaps more important to feel than to understand. Maybe that's why accepting and propagating such a lazy and erroneous definition is so easy. However, on the flip side, saying, "parkour is just something you feel, it's freedom, man. It's just movement. It's whatever you choose", really doesn't help anyone. This broadness is also why having any debates about parkour has always been so hard. You're likely to come to a juncture where you are arguing about different things from a background of different ideas, pulling from incompatible examples and angles, and arguments often go nowhere. That's also why debates about veganism, capitalism, socialism, climate change, and abortion are complex and ongoing, as there are

numerous ideas, values, and scenarios associated with these concepts to disagree on. We all have different ideas about what parkour is, including the movements and styles we think it does or does not encompass. This makes sense because parkour has many different traits that appeal to various personalities.

Parkour is said to be an experiential practice, in that it must be practised to be fully understood. And still, even then, as you'll read in the next chapter, we have a tough time expressing what we do, despite some being seasoned practitioners. The term *parkour* has become an increasingly ambiguous and nebulous concept. But we must understand that it's far from the word's problem. The fault lies with us. The lack of a clear definition of what parkour means reflects the community of speakers using the word more than the word itself. To create a new definition, we must identify some core unifying characteristics; some foundational themes we all agree on. And it just so happens that I extracted some from some of you without you even knowing.

Chapter 12 - Redefining Parkour

If you remember from Chapter 1, I conducted two Instagram polls asking whether people agreed with the current Wikipedia definition and whether they felt it described how they chose to practice. After this, I asked them to submit their own definition. However, they were limited to a few characters in the question box provided by Instagram. I framed it as if they were defining parkour to a member of the public who had never heard of it before. I got many replies and a surprising collection of definitions—thousands of short but unique definitions, from the weird to the wonderful to the wonderfully weird. I had collected way more data than I knew what to do with. Here are a few personal favourites:

> "Gaps init", "Backflip", "Carefully considered body tosses, usually involving walls or rails", "Extreme track and field", "Infinite art", "Control over bitches", "Great daily source of anxiety, fear, depression and self-harm.", "Woosh run fast!", "frog", "Parkour is a language", "Parkour is a mindset", "way of life", "You jump fast and sometimes run", "freedom", "A to B. Nothing else.", "Use all elements like walls or anything to have fun and satisfy your ego", "Skateboard without the board gymnastics but cool", "Grown men jumping on walls in style", "Hippity hoppity on someone's property", "A very funny training hoping to not injure your ankles and knees."

So, it is not exactly the best qualitative data to formulate a formal consensus. But there were indeed also many sincere, less stupid, and non-trolling answers. And, of course, a lot of sincere answers, but from stupid people. Many people seemed to describe what parkour is to them rather than explaining what it actually *is* as an activity. If some examples given were aimed at an inquisitive layperson, they would leave the person more befuddled after the explanation than before. Imagine you're at a dinner table meeting your new partner's

parents for the first time, and after you tell them you do parkour, they ask what it is, only for you to reply in a grave tone, "Freedom...." The funny thing is, there were maybe over ten definitions that featured only the word "*freedom*." The word *freedom* by itself doesn't define anything other than the word *freedom*! Conversely, imagine answering at the new partner's parents' dinner table, "It's A to B. Nothing else." You'll not only confuse them further, but they'll also be concerned for their son or daughter's safety.

All in all, my little definition experiment only exacerbated my despair. Many definitions conflicted with one another, and in a surprising number of cases, a single definition conflicted with itself.

However, there were undoubtedly some recurring words and themes that can prove helpful. Here is a list of words, in no particular order, that showed up multiple times:

Movement	Expression	Improve	Happy
Environment	Mental	Fun	Urban
Challenges	Obstacles	Freedom	Style
Create	Physical	Jump	Running
Creativity	Body	Move	Climbing
Overcoming	Art	Exploring	Efficient
Fear	Limits	Happiness	A to B/A2B

These may all seem very obvious, but they are handy for our definition. Even though these words are without context, having been extracted from their complete sentences, there's enough to gauge some general feelings towards the word parkour. It is interesting that, despite how many people agreed with the Wikipedia definition in the first poll (which, if you can remember, 67% agreed), compared to the words used in the majority of people's definitions. It seems there's not only a contradiction between how we think and how we train but also between how we think and how we... think.

Either way, despite being a messy thought experiment, I think there are more than enough ideas and themes here to start tying them together and crafting our new and improved definition.

The goal now is to take these individual puzzle pieces and meld them together into a definition that we can all agree on. Let's first dissect some of these words and concepts to see how they're significant to the anatomy of parkour. We must understand the words to create a definition that doesn't incite further confusion.

To be clear, there is way more to be said about the words below and their relation to the whole, some of which deserve entire essays or books. (David Witchell has written a book on the subject of style in parkour.) But for our purposes, it's just a barebones summary to help us understand how they relate and why they're crucial unifying themes under the term parkour. That said, in some areas, you won't be spared from tangential rants. Some are more foundational in how the practice is carried out physically; others are less crucial and describe varying intentions and motivations. Suppose you feel I've not paid due attention to some vital philosophical aspects that some assign to the practice and consider crucial to its essence. In that case, I urge you to remember that this isn't for defining *your* practice and intentions, but rather a descriptive definition of *the* practice as a whole that houses everyone.

Movement & Move

Movement and *Move* are obvious ones to start with, as movement is the primary foundation for everything parkour visibly encapsulates. No arguments here. Let's include them in our definition.

Body

Let's put *body* into the mix, as our body is the vehicle we're piloting to engage in movement. I don't think we need to mention any equipment or lack thereof. Let's avoid cultural stigmas in our new definition. A good definition that doesn't mention equipment should leave it clear enough. Anyone's preferences for assisting equipment, like crash mats, crutches, pads, gloves, grip tape, and chalk, are their own business. However, in a formal competitive format, it depends on the rules.

For the sake of future-proofing this book, I will add the caveat that if civilisation falls into a totalitarian AI simulation regime and all of our consciousnesses are uploaded to the cloud against our will, perhaps it may be permissible to still be considered parkour when we're all disembodied avatars in a simulated reality, especially if we have no other choice. This apocalyptic future may actually be ideal for all the Matrix fans in the community who will finally be able to do roof gaps like Neo. But until Ray Kurzweil and other Silicon Valley transhumanist demons get their wish, we can at least say that you are not actually doing parkour when playing Storror Parkour Pro or any other video game. You must be piloting your own meat suit to be doing parkour.

Environment

Environment is another fundamental theme, but we can get rid of *Urban*, as although parkour largely takes place in built-up urban areas, parkour is, and has always been, applied to natural spaces. Let's not forget that the Ecouen Forest in Sarcelles played a significant role in its early development. Although re-imagining the urban environment was crucial to the spectacle that drew (and continues to draw) publicity to parkour, it was never intended to be limited to any specific environment. So long as there are features to interact with, it's fair game. Also, as time passes, we seem to be training more and more in parkour gyms, parks, and purpose-built event spaces.

It has long been celebrated that we re-image and repurpose features and environments in unintended ways. Some view parkour as a cultural movement aimed at reclaiming the urban landscape and breaking the monotony of urban life. The fact that it's not merely a collection of techniques but an ideological outlook on space has always given parkour an anti-establishment, countercultural tinge, as we aren't conforming to the specific architectural design of hyper-regulated urban centres of consumption. Parkour can be viewed as a rejection of urban planning designed to seamlessly shuttle consumers from one purchase to another. And because we aren't adhering to the norms of walking, sitting and shopping, we are all too often moved on by security or police, whether from commercial areas or hyper-

regulated public spaces. While some high-street buskers and street performers are not only permitted but also sought out by city councils to liven up dull commercial areas, parkour is still often viewed as antisocial behaviour and a disruptor of commerce.

Beyond any radical anti-establishment portrayals, viewing the world as something to be interacted with for play, expression, athletic achievement, or any form of personal gain is a beautiful and radical shift in perspective. Parkour Visions coach and architect Caitlin Pontrella explains:

> "The psychological shift is your understanding of yourself in your world and your understanding of the world. When you're training parkour outside and interacting with everyday objects, you're radically changing what they are. It's like, this bench for the last thirty years of my life was only something I sat on, but now it's this thing I can play with. And that, despite seeming very small, is a radical shift of mind. It goes from your environment being this dictated and oppressive space where you're told what is and isn't appropriate based on how it's designed, to, I can now take control of where I live just by changing the way I look at it."

The emergence of parkour parks and gyms has long faced pushback from purists, who see them as contradicting the values of repurposing space. There was also the worry that we'd more likely get moved on from spots and told, "You've got a bloody park for this jump-jumpy game now! Bugger off over there instead!" Although the movements may be the same, some claim that it loses something ineffable when performed on purpose-built structures. I, like many, definitely instinctively prefer watching outdoor footage to indoor footage. Beyond only the aesthetics and ideological reasons, some put outdoor training on a pedestal above gyms because you don't have the option to simply move obstacles or flop a crash mat down whenever you're struggling to commit to a challenge, instead of adapting to the environment as is. Rather than using your experience and judgement to overcome a mental challenge, you can remove consequences by

relying on something soft to fall on. Even if you remove the crash mat and do the jump again afterwards, you still haven't arrived at your goal solely off your mental ability.

There have been numerous arguments like this throughout the years. I remember when even measuring out a jump with your feet to boost confidence was looked down upon, because you should work to gauge whether you can make it with your vision alone. Much of this came from the A-to-B utility camp that demanded, "You won't have time to measure out a jump in an emergency, so why rely on it?" But some would also argue that if you measured out jumps too often, your vision for what you can do would atrophy, and so would your ability to see and go. I'd argue occasional measuring can help inform your vision and reaffirm that a jump is possible, especially when fear and height can easily skew your perception. Having more data to pull from can only help and acts as another tool in your mental toolkit. However, an issue with relying too heavily on crash mats or spotting too often is that you're less likely to build the necessary skills to bail safely without them. Knowing you can save yourself if things don't go to plan is a massive component of a strong mental game. If you know you can bounce off, crane, eat high impacts and correct your body position in the air like a cat, you have a higher readiness to commit to heinous challenges than the parkourist who relies on a crash mat or a spot from a friend whenever they're unsure. This over-reliance robs you of the mental tools and self-awareness needed for scary challenges when crash mats and spots aren't available. However, if you only care about getting the clip, use crash mats to your heart's content. If you want, lug bouldering mats to the spot and drape them over every spooky challenge.

Another factor is the illusion of safety that these consequence-reducing measures provide. We've all heard stories of someone doing something where they assumed a lower degree of consequence due to crash mats or spotting, and it muddies their judgment and exposes them to a greater consequence.

Risk Compensation is a theory suggesting that people typically adjust their behaviour in response to perceived risk: becoming more careful when they perceive greater risk and less careful when they feel more protected. Similarly, the Peltzman Effect is a theory that

people are more likely to engage in risky behaviour when security measures have been increased. In the late 1960s, new car safety measures, including seatbelt mandates and improved car safety technologies, were introduced. Dr Sam Peltzman investigated whether these measures reduced automobile death rates. He found no decrease and theorised that this was because drivers felt safer and therefore were more likely to make riskier driving decisions, consequently increasing the likelihood of car crashes. Although the seatbelts often saved more lives behind the wheel, the pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists involved in the accidents weren't so lucky. As mentioned in Chapter 2, although injury rates in Rugby and American football may be similar, the use of more padding in the latter results in more severe injuries due to a false sense of safety, which increases the potential for more forceful tackles. In contrast, rugby players without the padding are often incentivised to develop more strategic tackling techniques to avoid injury.

In Chapter 2, I mentioned Callum Manzi's front flip from the top to the bottom of IMAX, where he narrowly escaped death with only a broken ankle because the crash mat created a higher sense of safety and lower perceived risk. A more well-known example is Ryan Doyle breaking his leg at the first Red Bull Art Of Motion in 2007. The organisers brought crash mats to the course to incentivise more daring moves while still providing safety, yet Ryan finished his line with a double cork and missed the mat. Jesse Peveril has broken his foot flipping from a height into a shallow, concrete-bottomed foam pit he hadn't checked. And many of us have successfully landed flips to mats, only to sprain our ankles on the side of them when walking away. Chaotically placed mats in gyms may cause more ankle sprains than they prevent!

Spotting for jumps can create another illusion of safety, especially when the spotter has no clue what they're doing. Just being a body holding their arms up in apprehensive anticipation doesn't guarantee the jumper's safety. The jumper often takes fewer precautions and relies too heavily on the spotter beneath, who hasn't thoroughly thought things through. This can result in a chaotic mess of two idiots colliding, surrounded by hard concrete, with both the jumper and the spotter getting hurt. There's a classic clip where Teddy

Ponceau attempts a side flip gap at the famed Bercy Park fountain in Paris, and Pierre Maujean is eagerly standing at the landing to prevent him from overshooting into the cavernous, cigarette-butt-filled shallow-water pit below. Two more spotters are also underneath, strategically placed in case of both overshoot and undershoot. Sure enough, Ponceau aggressively overshoots with his side flip, and instead of the spotter stopping his momentum, he gets rugby tackled and dragged down into the pit, and one sustains a head injury. And, of course, the additional two spotters beneath prevented nothing and may as well not have been there.

In the first *Roof Culture* video, Max Cave attempts a front flip gap to arm jump on a steep lead slant while Ryan Walsh spots from below in a narrow gully. Ryan optimistically aimed to prevent Max from sliding down and clattering into a wall in the gully if he came up short. Max came short of the top lip by mere inches and slid down the steep slope for Ryan to receive a booty to the face, propelling him back to hit his head on the wall behind.

Offering a spot seems like a nice way to boost your friend's confidence, but not if it comes in the form of artificial mental support that reduces the jumper's respect for the dangers. It's a personal choice to utilise whatever safety precautions you want, as long as you realise how they might detract from the nature of the activity. The mental gains from overcoming fear are a valuable aspect of our sport. Can you make a challenge as safe as possible without distorting what you set out to achieve or learn in the first place?

Modular gym equipment can help build skills and create specific lines, but again, it loses the aesthetic function of adapting to a space. Some don't like movable obstacles and frequently changing indoor spaces because challenges disappear when the space is altered. When completing a historic challenge at an outdoor spot or setting an NBD (never been done) signifying an advancement at that spot and in the sport, we get a sense we're engaging with and contributing to that spot's history, and thus the community in a meaningful way. We can aspire to overcome the same challenges and measure our progress against those of those before us. This is a big reason why it's so devastating when a spot is demolished. London's Vauxhall Maze had a

history of accolades that drew people from far and wide to try. People had goals on the ugly cluster of walls that motivated their training. After its demolition in 2015, everything was washed away, except for the videos and memories. Vltavská in Prague was reduced to rubble, and at the 2024 Holding Hands jam, parkourists came from all over with flowers in hand to pay their respects at the construction site grave. The final Vltavská session saw dozens of parkourists launching themselves onto its tall mounds of mud and debris, culminating in a guy chucking a triple side flip onto his back. The local group, Avanti Garda, collected and sold small shards of the walls, packaged as commemorative collectables. I am a proud owner of one. In 2015, I also nabbed a chunk of the Vauxhall Maze, along with one of four Lambeth Council signs that reads, "Private property for tenants and residents use only. No freerunners. Thank you."

Despite modular equipment keeping a gym fresh and fun, it's almost impossible to maintain specific long-term goals in a gym that radically changes so often, which removes some of the communal value and historical potential from the space. Climbers speak similarly about their gyms. Sets will stay for a few months, climbers will toil away, rushing to finish their projects, then they vanish, and new routes are drilled in. Outside, they can engage in a rich history of climbs, some of which were first ascended more than 50 years ago. They can set long-term projects and train specifically for them. Rocks will always survive, so long as climbers don't pull on wet sandstone. However, our parkour spots are at the mercy of urban development. By the stroke of a pen, IMAX in London, Kaos in Lisbon, Tres Cantos in Madrid, and Freeway Park in Seattle can all be transformed into a cold, dead, corporate minimalist utopia. There have been plans for years to completely transform the two IMAX spots. If skaters only narrowly saved the historic Southbank Undercroft spot from corporate oblivion in 2014, I doubt we have any chance of saving IMAX.

With climbing's massive boom in popularity since its Olympics debut and the BAFTA and Academy Award-winning documentary *Free Solo*, climbing gyms have become overrun with new, eager and starry-eyed gumbies, most of whom may never venture out to climb on real rock.

When I met elite climbers Alex Honnold and Emil Abrahamsson, I asked them what value they thought climbers would be missing out on if their climbing only took place within the walls of the climbing gym. Honnold replied that they might struggle to see routes and holds that aren't colour-coded and lathered in chalk when they transition outdoors. Gyms make it so easy with their colour-graded routes that it can be challenging to transition to outdoor crags. Similarly, parkour gym rats may have difficulty developing parkour vision outdoors if they're only ever interpreting wood and bars. And we don't have guidebooks like climbers do, spelling everything out for us.

Honnold also said they would miss out on learning about many techniques, problems and surfaces found on real rock that the gym cannot prepare them for. This can also be true for parkour, as, unless thoughtfully designed, gyms won't offer the variety of shapes as outside, especially in the non-replicable natural world. As for surfaces, gyms are usually built for optimal grip. Sturdiness of obstacles is (mostly) guaranteed, unlike outdoors, where you're best to do your due diligence and check surfaces when arriving at a new spot. Problems we face outdoors include finding spots, dealing with security, police, and property owners, managing angry and volatile public interactions, and dealing with weather and dark evenings. And, not to mention, some spots can be dreadfully dirty.

But the parkour gym solves all these problems. It's a safe and sanctioned space where no one can harm you but yourself, and even if you do fall, there's usually rubber flooring to dampen the blow. It's well lit, appropriately air-conditioned, relatively clean apart from the chalk bowl that some kid just knocked over, and there's no need to find spots, because it's all already there for you. However, training in a gym doesn't fully prepare you for the realities of parkour in the great outdoors.

Although Alex slightly misunderstood my question. What if their climbing ONLY took place in a gym? What if they were content indoors and saw no reason to take the plunge to migrate outside? This is true for many new climbers and parkourists alike. If their training takes place solely indoors, they need not prepare for the harsh troubles of the outdoors. They don't need to learn the real rock techniques Alex speaks of. They can remain content with their

coloured resin holds, grippy wooden walls, solid and sturdy bars, and perfect conditions.

Emil Abrahamsson also mentioned that outdoor rock climbing is a form of communing with nature. Being outside, despite the problems it can create, is beautiful. For parkour, unless we're training in nature, I'm not sure we can draw the same conclusion when comparing to Peckham High Street, Bristol's multi-storey car parks, out the front of Basingstoke's shopping centre, or the thousands of piss-soaked alleys and corners we call parkour spots. But, on Brighton rooftops above the din of the commuters, shoppers and cars on the streets below, who are entirely oblivious to my presence. The session has died down, and a hacky-sack circle has opened up on a flat section of the roof. The sun is setting over my beloved city, painting everything with a stunning orange hue. At times like these, I stare out over my hometown and think to myself, "Hell yeah, dude. We run this friggin' town, baby!" No, not really. But it is quite cool.

Emil also spoke about the effort of driving to new locations, lugging bouldering pads, rope, and gear over rough terrain to reach the crag, referring to confusing guidebooks for finding climbs, and dealing with the often dangerous consequences of the weather. He said these are all part of the adventure that gym climbers would miss out on. These are all the ingredients for a type-2 fun day out. The same can be said for the outdoor parkour experience. All the hassles and problems that arise, all the troubleshooting when the surfaces are unideal for the challenge in mind, dealing with the police, security, the crackheads and Karens, and most of all, the filth. Oh, the blessed and beautiful filth! Some days, I come home stinking and covered in dry flecks of moss after a long day of training, and when I finally wash my hands, I have to cycle between soap and water at least three times, only for remnants of dirt to remain. Some days we'll get pizza and a beer after a session, all rocking up to the pizzeria with clothes ripped from barbed wire or sliding on tiled roofs, and every single one of us "forgets" to wash our hands before tucking into our first slice. Filth is a mark of a good day spent on the streets. The gym rat will miss out on the fullness of the parkour experience—the rich experience that makes a training day an adventure with your friends.

Everything listed above isn't just an annoying problem; some of it can provide opportunities for building vital life skills.

Ryan Ford once wrote, "Outdoor parkour is a wolf. Indoor parkour is a dog. One is wild, and one was domesticated. Indoors can produce athletic huskies, hounds, pit bulls, mastiffs, and more. But it's still not a wolf! If you want to experience the full benefits of parkour, you gotta get outside too."

It's maybe harder to compare the difference in benefits than the value. In this case, I'm referring to the value of the richness of experience; everything that makes a day of parkour an adventure worthy of a story. Ryan seems to be pointing to what the individual gains from the experiences within the sport. However, the gym still provides a breadth of benefits. We can reap all the technical coordination benefits from training in a gym, especially when learning flips and tricks. In fact, I guarantee an overwhelming majority of the tricks we see outside were first honed indoors. Good opportunities for practising swings are undoubtedly easier to come by in gyms. As for the physical aspect, our muscles, connective tissue, and bones won't be able to tell too much of a difference between hard wooden surfaces and concrete, so they will still become stronger and more resilient. The mental aspects remain so long as you're not constantly replacing good judgment and decision making with flopping a crash mat over every landing. Creativity and a parkour vision are still gained by applying imagined challenges and lines to a space, regardless of whether it is built for it. With this in mind, it becomes harder to distinguish between a domesticated dog and a wild wolf. As for competitions held in gyms, the dogs appear to win an awful lot of medals. And if the wolf wants to win a Skill competition, they'd better spend some time in the gym to train a variety of swings so as not to get knocked off the podium by huskies, hounds and pit bulls. And there is no way that the dedicated wolf is coming anywhere near the Style podium.

Conversely, the dog may be ill-equipped for a street competition. And you can bet they will never be invited to a Capstone shoot. And if a dog is taken on a night mission across the rooftops of Brighton, they'd better bring a poo bag.

Both Ryan Ford and Christian Harmat replied to one of my story posts, in which I mentioned that most training takes place outdoors. They said that the tides may have shifted more recently towards gyms. Ryan explained, "I think in 2025, the majority of training hours actually happen indoors. If our unit of measurement is total hours of training, busy parkour gyms can rack up hundreds, maybe even thousands of hours almost every day, while the surrounding streets lag significantly behind."

Christian told me, "The numbers might have shifted. Jesse Peveril has 200 kids weekly in a 350 square metre gym, and he's just opened a new one. We have 300 kids weekly and teach from 8 am to 8 pm. With the amount of gyms in the US, it must be even crazier."

Your knee-jerk reaction to these claims might be that they don't count as the core parkour community; they're just students. I understand, but who's to say their practice is no less valid than anyone else's? Even so, the core community spends considerably more time training in gyms, as many cities have only one (sometimes even two), especially with fewer daylight hours to spend outside, and parkourists have increasing responsibilities as they age. In countries where the weather is terrible for more than half the year, and the sun has set by the time work finishes, it makes far more sense to move indoors when there's the option. We're not all teenagers anymore and must fit our training between work and time with our partners and families. Even when we have days off work, it's hard for our schedules to align with our friends'. Christian continued, "I often choose to visit a gym rather than go through the effort of finding a spot alone. In the gym, at least I know I'll find people to train with. As time gets scrambled with so many extra tasks, most of us choose the easy way to get an efficient two hours in an environment that satisfies our needs, rather than trying to get lucky with a new spot."

And what of the communities without a local gym? With the schedule and weather constraints, their energy will be directed toward bouldering, running, lifting weights, or anything that quells the hankering for movement. Which is better than nothing, but it's not parkour.

In a Height Drop podcast episode, Phil Doyle made a light-hearted jab about how Darryl Stingley trains too often in the gym. Phil is not the only person to mock Darryl in this way. Giles Campbell Longley also asserted on his podcast that too much time in the gym holds Darryl back. Phil, Giles and others fail to consider how training in the streets of San Francisco as a black man can feel vastly different to a white man in Cambridge or Tunbridge Wells. Darryl has stated on an Obsidian Gathering podcast panel:

> "Police are trained to be scared of certain groups, that's absolutely true. Profiling is genuinely a part of their job... Police in America were never meant to protect all of us. Police in America are derived from slave patrols; that's how police were formed, and it's only been so many years, their practices haven't changed all that much. How they're trained, the stories that they're told, and certain experiences they've either had or heard other officers having, lead them to believe they must respond [by establishing fear and control]. But you chose to put the badge on and be a cop. I did not choose to be profiled by you. You chose to be what is called a protector, and I didn't choose to be considered a threat by your training."

Aside from Darryl's experience shaping this perspective, he was raised by his father, a veteran of the Oakland police department, and knows all too well how the police operate. Growing up hearing the tragic stories of Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin, it's natural to feel it's far more dangerous to stretch the rules if you are BIPOC in many countries where prejudice is still rife. Darryl has expressed, "The majority of good training I've gotten has been in the gym because no one can fuck with me there. The main issue I think I have being black in the sport is that I don't feel I have the freedoms my white friends all share."

He has had to watch on as his white European peers' skill and online following soared by having free rein over rooftops and other private property without fear of potentially fatal consequences at the

hands of authorities, and then had his gym training stigmatised by those peers.

Lynn Jung told me about when she, Darryl, and Melissa Rivera were stopped by two officers who marched straight over to him, their hands resting on their sidearms, completely disregarding the two women and even letting them walk away to deal with Darryl. This is a common occurrence, albeit a relatively tame one on this occasion; however, even relatively benign interactions can escalate dramatically simply by asserting their rights. About 1,000 civilians are killed each year by police officers in the United States. Black men are 2.5 times more likely than white men to be killed by police during their lifetime. Black people who were fatally shot by police seemed to be twice as likely as white people to be unarmed.

Dan Dye from Flint, Michigan, has expressed:

> "I stay away from residential areas. I stay away from areas that are too secluded. I don't play music with portable speakers. If there's a lot of foot traffic, I make myself as visible as possible so I don't scare anyone or look suspicious. I don't climb anything in public. I don't wear hats, depending on the location I'm training at. When I do go train, I check to make sure I have ID. I move slowly unless I am doing a skill—no running or sudden movements—I leave my bag in a place that is seen clearly, and I go through it slowly whenever I touch it. I avoid hitting plants, and I make sure I acknowledge every passerby with a smile and a wave to assure them that I am not a threat."

This may seem dramatically excessive, even verging on paranoia, but this is the harsh reality of a black man wishing to train in many regions of the US to mitigate the risk of persecution. This is hardly an issue only with the authorities. In 2012, Trayvon Martin was gunned down at age seventeen by a neighbourhood watch coordinator for the gated community where Trayvon was visiting relatives. Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed by three white men in 2020 while jogging in his neighbourhood in Brunswick, Georgia. I cannot imagine having

to smile at every passing pedestrian for my safety while training. Darryl has also written:

> "People of colour here in the US don't have the same experience with outdoor sports in public or private space. Our relationship not only with Law Enforcement, but also with a very prejudiced majority white public, can and has often resulted in violence against us. And not even for doing something like parkour... I'm talking just being somewhere and 'fitting a description'. A gym space is vital to making parkour accessible to oppressed people. It is one of the reasons that I have made it so far in my practice and limited my interactions with Law Enforcement so much."

While the problems associated with street training can add to the adventure of a training day, it's far safer and more convenient for many groups to have an undisturbed session in the gym, which serves as a communal hub and a safe space. Some instinctively recoil at the concept of *safe spaces* as they restrict exposure to the real world, and thus growth. But, being held at gunpoint by those sworn to protect and serve, or being on the receiving end of racial, misogynistic, homophobic or transphobic violence, is not an adventure—it's trauma.

With all this being said, parkour culture still appears to be driven by outdoor training. Most influential video content is street-based. Darryl Stingley has still ventured to produce the iconic video *TRIALS MORALES*, among others. Observing the gradual shift toward indoor training and considering a future in which parkour has become a gym sport can be worrying. Right now, gyms serve as a vital lifeblood to our industry, a communal hub and safe space, a convenient venue for coaching and competitions, and above all, a fantastic place to train and build skills with friends. For many of us, the outdoors still represents where we aspire to do our best work. It's our proving grounds.

Storror has hosted an annual awards show on YouTube since 2019, offering cash prizes in numerous categories. Since its inception, we've maintained the stance, "If it's in the gym, it's in the bin", implying that gym clips are excluded for consideration. We don't intend to discourage gym training entirely; we aim to celebrate what we see as the pinnacle of the graft and skill that go into the most authentic stage on which parkour can be performed. Although we recognise the need for purpose-built spaces, we don't want the raw essence of our culture to fade.

I hope anyone who started reading this thinking *gym training isn't parkour* now has a more balanced perspective. We shouldn't exclude these valuable gyms, parks, or event spaces by drawing a lazy black-and-white distinction, no matter how much one may believe that solely training in a gym is a diluted version of the sport. Parkour practised anywhere has value to the practitioner. Repurposing urban environments is part of parkour, but where you practice doesn't make it parkour or not. The same applies to skateboarding in parks versus the streets, or climbing on natural rock versus in the gym. The "in the gym, in the bin" view is yet another philosophical, ideological and aesthetic preference we should avoid in our definition.

Happy, Happiness & Fun

Although essential for all of us as internal effects of practising and important motivators, these vague emotional states are at the root of many activities, sports, and life generally. They don't serve to paint a descriptive picture of parkour. Maybe it's a difficult and redundant puzzle piece to squeeze in.

Freedom

This is seemingly crucial to many who contributed definitions. Especially when many definitions, including the word, were simply the word alone. I can only guess that these eloquently spoken individuals may have meant that having a skillset that aids you in manoeuvring any terrain or obstacle gives you a certain amount of freedom to go where you want. If we reach a certain skill level, we'll

be less confined by our imposing surroundings. More options for how we wish to travel on foot in dense spaces are available. This also aligns with a definition David Belle gave in his interview with Matthieu Kassovitz. However, society has rules regarding trespass on private property and criminal damage. The laws of physics are also fairly strict and unwavering.

Freedom, as a byproduct of the sport being so broad, is foundational to parkour's character. There is also freedom in the absence of rules or regulations that keep its practitioners in a box. Unlike other codified movement practices and run-of-the-mill team sports, you're free to pursue whatever aspect of the sport that appeals to you without constraint. And there are many aspects to explore. As I've argued in Chapter 4, the lack of rules and clearly defined boundaries is paramount for keeping parkour from sliding down the slippery slope towards something akin to tradition-laden gymnastics.

However, there are inevitably social conventions by which one can feel constrained. Parkourists can construct dogmatic taboos around particular movement choices, even down to how we link moves. The coffee grinder is a move commonly laughed at and rejected as a poor choice, similar to the Didi roll being misused as a connecting move. Some scoff at more avant-garde styles and moves. Switch-walking refers to walking backwards as if imitating a skier or rollerblader in fakie, often used after landing backwards or as a connection between moves. The group Beans from the USA became known for pushing what many considered alternative parkour, and switchwalking became associated with Beans, along with other off-axis skiing-inspired tricks. In 2022, Josh Malone posted a line in a dirt ditch, featuring a switchwalk, and the caption read simply, "#parkour". Malone's comments were flooded with parkourists, predominantly from France and the UK, shitting on his movement. The tone tended to be, "Don't you dare call this gay shit parkour!" Malone had intentionally or unintentionally challenged people's stylistic conventions and offended their sense of what parkour can be. I'm leaning more towards believing it was intentional, considering how provocative the caption can be read. He was out to ruffle some feathers and succeeded, and I honestly respect the hell out of it. People can have their tastes, but slamming someone's choices or

labelling it "not parkour" is not only rude, but it also defies the claim that parkour is a free and ruleless sport.

Stylistic line creation can often be shaped by the community's feelings towards nuances in movement, but if you shed these preconceptions, you truly can do whatever you want. If we're too constrained by others' opinions and the current stylistic norms, we can limit ourselves, our expression and the expansion of parkour's skill tree branches. Nothing is to stop us from criticising others' art, but doing so, especially in a shitty way, can halt the progress of an idea in its infancy before it has the chance to blossom. However, there will always be people like Beans and Matt McCreary who will keep chugging along on their path, unaffected by the negative comments—or even the positive ones.

This also goes for those who simply wish to specialise in a specific branch of the skill tree, whether that's big running precisions, height drops, kong gainers, ascents, descents, swings, rail flow, cat backs, or landing cast backs off progressively lower ledges. No one is obligated to be a well-balanced all-rounder, and in fact, expecting this of everyone thwarts specialisation and progress. We'd likely miss out on Joe Scandrett's pole slides and descents, Travis Verkaik's kong gainer precisions, Tom Coppola's ascents and dives through tight spaces, Thomas MPO's ginormous cat passes, Toby Segar's level arm jumps, Lisa Eckert's downward arm jumps, Dominic Di Tommaso's stratospheric front flips, Darryl Stingley's cat backs, Orlando Devaux's plyo power, Tim Champion's swings and so on. Some who specialise may see fewer options in an environment, making their practice more constrained. However, unlike the constrained sport of gymnastics, this is by their own choice rather than due to the sport's inherent narrowness.

Parkour is self-led. As with skateboarding and other street sports, we are at the helm, directing our personal practice. On top of this, parkour is so broad, and you can follow any rabbit hole of speciality you're drawn to. And as what you're drawn to can change from day to day, month to month or minute to minute, there is an enormous sense of freedom. You practice in a way that suits your body and your whims. So, rather than including the word *freedom* in the definition for the sense that one feels when training, it might be

better to use the term *self-led* or *self-directed*, or, if it suits you better, maybe we can get rid of everything else and just have our definition as the word *freedom*.

Exploring

We are constantly *exploring*. As whatever environment we may find ourselves in is rife with movement opportunities, we make a continuing effort to explore our surroundings, whether it's to explore a spot for niche features to interact with, specific moves we want to try, or explore a town or city for different spots to inspire new movement and challenges. And, if you like, we're also exploring ourselves and what our minds and bodies are capable of. Flynn Disney has said, "Exploration is the space that mediates between what we know and what we don't know. When you can't fully predict the consequences of your actions, but you push forward to find them out, you are exploring. When you occupy a new space, physically, emotionally and psychologically, you are exploring. When you take a step away from your past self, towards your possible future, you are exploring."

You could say that's quite a significant underpinning unifying theme as well, although perhaps a secondary byproduct of the sport, as with *Freedom*, *Happy*, *Happiness* and *Fun*.

Running, Jumping and Climbing

As for categories of movement, such as *running*, *jumping*, and *climbing*, it can certainly help to clarify things for those who may have never seen parkour in action. Although most people by now have come into contact with parkour at some point, you'd be surprised by the number who don't know it by name, even by its anglophone-friendly third name, freerunning. These are usually the times I'll kick myself for being tongue-tied and blurting out, "It's pretty much gymnastics, but outside on walls and stuff." Listing some common types of movements involved in these instances can be helpful.

The more astute of you may have noticed in our handful of words that there was no mention of flips, tricks or spins. This is true;

however, people also made no mention of swings, rolls, vaults, slides, quadrupedal movement or any other category you can think of. Let's not forget, our goal is to effectively describe the sport as we practice it and understand it widely. In our definition, including acrobatics on our short list of movement types is an opportunity to clarify that going upside down, twisting, and spinning all fall within the broad umbrella of parkour.

Obstacles

As with the *Environment*, *Obstacles* are a definitive feature of parkour. We get psyched about finding new spots and seeing unique architecture used in interesting ways. Our competitions often value unique obstacle interactions in their judging criteria. Obstacles can be significant when the precise dimensions between certain walls and rails are ideal for a particular idea or jump. This is why we mourn spots when they get demolished or change substantially.

For people arguing to kick us off from their private property, it must be strange to comprehend why a specific alleyway or car park is so significant. The all too common, "Why here? Can't you go to the park instead?" Benj Cave says that in these situations, he's recently experimented with explaining in excruciating detail what he intends to do and why this particular spot, with its specific dimensions, is so unique for it. Of course, this often falls on deaf ears and fails to stop us from being kicked off, but at least hearing the varying responses is pretty funny.

Obstacles are as necessary in parkour as music is in dance. In fact, if you ever need to explain parkour in a hurry and reduce it to its bare bones, "moving with obstacles" can be sufficient. Skateboarding and BMX have flatland subsports, but there is no flatland parkour. That's merely tricking, tumbling, breakdancing, long jump, triple jump or running. The necessity of obstacle interaction has become apparent in the judging criteria for Red Bull Art of Motion competitions in the last ten years. If you start and end a move or combo that doesn't interact with any of the course's features in your run, that combo or move will not affect your final score for the run. During the qualifiers in Santorini in 2017, this stirred up a flurry of

confusion and controversy when Russia's Kirya Kolesnikov did a roundoff double backflip on flat ground – which is a challenging and risky move and no doubt a highlight of the day, which caused pandemonium among the crowd – but he came out lower on the leaderboard than everyone expected.

Are tumbling movements on their own just tumbling? Are tricking movements on their own just tricking? Are breakdancing moves on their own just breakdancing? Are connection moves like Didi rolls and other quadrupedal floor squirming movements on their own just... bullshit? At what point do we consider a line a parkour line? Or a parkour move? Does it need to involve interaction with obstacles to be considered parkour? And is tricking, but off platforms and ledges, parkour? Is it interacting with obstacles when the obstacle is a 6-inch-high ledge, and the movement is a single move from it onto sand? There are quite a few people with an extensive background in tricking, and their runs often look like a cat pass over a wall followed by a few steps before a double cork on flat, something with a touchdown raiz, or maybe a tumble.

Perhaps the line into parkour is crossed as soon as interacting with an obstacle affects the movement, even a low ledge or a hill. Tricking and tumbling are flat-ground practices in which the only environment they're spatially concerned with is the edges of the sprung floor or tumble track. As soon as any gradient is introduced, they're suddenly adapting to obstacles, albeit small ones. Consecutive tricks performed down 6-foot-wide, six-inch-high steps are still dramatically different from the same tricking combo on flat ground. This is undoubtedly an obstacle interaction, no matter how you look at it.

Either way, interacting with *obstacles* is an essential element of parkour and, in most cases, a defining feature of what we do. It should, without a doubt, be slotted into our definition. We are among the handful of other great sports that subvert and utilise everything we find for our gain, whether natural, man-made or purpose-built. With parkour, skateboarding, rollerblading, BMX, and others, we have endless varieties of shapes and architecture to incorporate an almost infinite number of movement possibilities. We like to use stuff. As Sébastien Foucan aptly says in Jump Britain, "Everything is good."

Mental & Fear

Mental and *Fear* are essential features. Parkour is a mind-and-body practice. It's often said that parkour is far more of a mental practice than a physical one. People say stuff like, "Parkour is 20% physical and 80% mental." However, this will vary between individuals, not because some don't get rattled by challenges as much as others, but because some won't voluntarily fight psychological demons every time they train. Still, it's pretty hard to get anywhere in parkour without confronting a level of fear. It doesn't matter who you are, whether a noob on their very first session or a proficient athlete with over a decade of experience and street accolades under their belt. However, traversing the process becomes easier through exposure. It never stops and should never stop if you wish to maintain a joyful, fulfilling and meaningful practice. Surprising yourself with success after deliberating and doubting for ages feels incredibly rewarding. Even at times when, upon completion, the challenge felt so easy, and you hate yourself for worrying and taking so long to commit.

If you get to a stage where you're not experiencing fear and doubt, you're likely not challenging yourself enough. This, of course, doesn't only mean a degree of fear evoked from facing mortality at some extreme height with fatal consequences; I also mean all degrees of fear. Anything that pushes your current edge and involves a degree of consequence and perceived risk. For example, thread dive rolls through handrails. Those are often pretty scary for me because I don't do them very often. Or novel moves, like a step in 360 from the ground to speed step onto a relatively low and wide wall. Pretty benign shit, but more often, pretty scary for me. Stripping your shins on walls and bonking your knees sucks. Just because I've jumped noteworthy gaps between skyscrapers doesn't mean that I don't cack my pants every time I do something new with a lesser degree of consequence.

This is not to say that fear is something that we need to extinguish within us. No one should ever aim to be completely fearless, because it plays an important role in keeping us grounded and safe. Fear is tightly linked to our sense of self-preservation, and that sense is necessary to keep us in one piece. To quote Carl Jung, "A creature that loses its fear is condemned to death."

We evolved to have fear for good reason. Fear keeps us sharp and forces us to pay attention to potential threats, taking necessary precautions to avoid succumbing to any lesser ideal scenario that could result in injury or death. Fear makes us acutely aware of every minute detail when performing any task in a scenario where death may be on the cards. Early hominids and all animals without fear of predation weren't as likely to survive to pass on their genes. Some of our ancestors may have been rewarded for rolling the dice with their ungrounded bravery, whether by climbing a tall tree to reach fruit or by fighting a predator. But those who could pick their battles more wisely due to a better-tuned intuitive sense of threat and safety, risk and reward, were more likely to live long enough to make babies, who will also likely grow up to pick their battles wisely.

We don't want to eliminate this powerful emotion, as to do so in parkour would be injurious. It would also eliminate the mental obstacle in parkour, which is a joy to overcome. What usually happens in a training session after overcoming something scary by making it less scary is to find a way to make it scarier, thus starting the process again. Instead of aiming to extinguish fear, we should strive to manage it, understand it better, and tune it to be more precise regarding our abilities in as many situations as possible.

If we intuitively feel fear towards a challenge, there is often a good reason for it, and we must determine what it is rather than trying to block it out entirely. Our intuition makes a subconscious appraisal of the challenge and provides us with the full-body sensation of fear, and it's our job to sift through the subconscious noise and use the best of our logic to deduce what elements of the challenge provoke the fear; we sift to see which scary aspects are logical and which are illogical. We prep and replicate to ensure we can execute the challenge properly.

In many cases, considering the worst-case scenarios for scary challenges is crucial for avoiding them. You shouldn't just avoid thinking about it because negative thoughts are frightening, and you feel that dwelling on them can prevent you from committing. Blocking out critical hazards to reduce fear is a wanton delusion. This doesn't mean envisioning yourself dying. It's simply about respecting

and acknowledging all potential threats rather than becoming a victim of thoughtless optimism.

Our inability to commit to a challenge whenever we want is another good argument against the existence of free will. We want to do something, but something inside us won't allow it. When it comes to pulling the trigger and finally committing, intuition runs the show. The main role of logic and rationality is to coax intuition across the finish line. Often, we think we've done all we can to prepare, but we still can't pull the trigger. We've run through the messy and disorganised catalogue of memories of previous similar challenges, and we've replicated the challenge by marking out the distances on the ground with hoodies, water bottles, chalk or anything we have to hand. Yet we still have a mental block to committing. Although we've exhausted everything in our logic toolkit, the subconscious processing of our intuition knows there's still a stone left unturned, and to system override this feeling and just "send it" is intensely hard to do. Intuition occasionally gives us a temporary green light as if a brief window of opportunity has suddenly opened, presenting us with a momentary sense of safety and trust in our ability. These opportunities are fragile, and the window can abruptly close if not seized quickly. I consider it a long-term goal to understand why these windows seemingly open and close spontaneously. To do so is to gain a deeper understanding of how your body and mind operate when managing fear. And having this knowledge can help you replicate these conditions in the future. However, I don't have any answers yet. I've had countless occasions where I've miraculously been given the green light, committed successfully, and had no clue what internally had changed for the switch to flip. Even if I did have answers, they would likely vary drastically from person to person.

Managing fear and risk and overcoming mental barriers are present wherever parkour is found. Voluntarily engaging in things that scare us is at the heart of what we do and a fundamental reason why parkour is so rewarding and valuable. Thus, these elements are vital pieces of the puzzle that must be included in our definition.

Physical

Physical should be thrown into the mix. As a mind-body practice, parkour can get pretty physical in terms of effort. Some challenges and sequences can undoubtedly be more physically demanding than technically or mentally, whereas others can be more psychological battles than physical. Either way, physical, technical and mental factors are always present at varying degrees.

The physical capacity of our top parkourists is akin to that of elite athletes. Granted, in terms of pure propulsive output, our most powerful may not hold a candle to high, triple and long jumpers, sprinters, dunkers in basketball, wide receivers and cornerbacks in American Football; we can jump and be fast, but not that high, far and fast. However, the high landing forces that even average parkourists take are practically unseen in any other sport. I would go as far as to wager that no one in human history outside of parkour has regularly taken impact from drops as knee-shatteringly high as Dominic Di Tommaso, Michael Khedoori, Ismael "Lambo" Vazquez, Reuben Benyunes and Leo Urban. A caveat is that drops from rollerblading, skateboarding, skiing, and snowboarding can be much higher in magnitude. However, they are dramatically aided by wheels or snow, which help spread landing forces with continued momentum. In contrast, without any additional implement or the cushion and slide of snow, we receive impacts far more abruptly and heavily, even with a perfectly executed roll.

Unlike other elite sports, we don't yet have access to elite strength and conditioning coaches. Yet we unruly street rats have somehow fumbled our way through trial and error, reaching these astonishing levels of athleticism. It's common to hear that parkour is damaging and unsustainable from laypeople with little knowledge or experience in exercise. Even large swaths of rehabilitation professionals, orthopaedic doctors and surgeons, strength and conditioning coaches, and other athletes can share the same pessimistic view. There's the prevailing idea that over time, after accumulating so much stress on our joints, our bodies will eventually become so riddled with degenerative maladies that we'll be left unable to continue and even struggle to perform daily tasks. While this may ring true for many stories of parkourists – like my childhood

friend Craig Teale from Chapter 9, who stopped training due to irreparable cartilage damage after just one year – it remains a too simplistic view, which disregards how bodies can adapt to stress.

Even parkourists fall victim to this view. After a year of absence from parkour, Kieran Owen made a video called *Did Jimmy the Giant quit Parkour?* He first claims that parkour is the most dangerous sport in the world (which is demonstrably false) and then continues with a tirade about how parkour is extremely detrimental to one's body. I find it funny when people accept a mechanism for biological adaptation in one setting – for example, in Kieran's more recent case, a gym bro bodybuilder doing bicep curls for bigger pipes – and then completely fail to make the same link when it comes to a different setting, like jumping and landing in parkour.

In the rehab and strength and conditioning worlds, many neurotic professionals tout the phrase "orthopaedic cost," meaning the long-term cost of submitting one's body to stressful loads. This term is often coupled with the analogy of a car accumulating mileage, or the gears of a machine gradually growing duller with extended use. Over time, cars accumulate wear and tear and eventually stop functioning without replacing parts. The overarching problem with this analogy is that humans are NOT mechanical objects! We are instead complex organic systems that can adapt. Rather than wear and tear, we wear and repair. Put simply, we stress our muscles, bones, and connective tissue to the extent we can tolerate, then eat, rest, recover, become stronger, and repeat. So long as the dosage of stress doesn't substantially exceed our tissues' current tolerance and we allow adequate time for recovery, we will avoid injury and thrive. The naive alternative view discourages people from training hard in any context out of fear of injury. With stress, the dose can make the poison, but it also can be the cure. Finding the correct dose to promote positive change is the name of the game. Stress is the currency of adaptation, and you're only as resilient as the stressors you regularly expose yourself to.

Many injuries occur due to people being unaccustomed to stressors. Today, most lower back pain sufferers are in pain due to chronic inactivity rather than overuse from exercise and sport. Those who avoid physical stress will experience atrophy of muscle,

connective tissue, the heart, and the lungs. Without a level of stress, even bones become brittle like Ryvita. Osteoporosis and sarcopenia become a problem for some old folks who retire their tennis shoes too early. Those who age more gracefully likely maintained a decent level of physical activity, which helps ward off a precipitous decline. Atrophy doesn't only apply to loathsome couch dwellers. After spending long periods in space with zero gravity, astronauts return to Earth fragile and barely able to stand because they have lived without the daily stress that gravity puts upon their bodies. They may use high-tech resistance-training machines on the ISS, but this cannot fully offset the effects of not having gravity pulling on them 24/7.

Suppose you're experiencing patella tendinopathy from training. In that case, it indicates that your tendon was ill-equipped to handle the loads you exposed it to with a level of training frequency, volume or intensity. When your ill-informed doctor tells you that you must rest and stop training entirely for a month to let the inflammation go down and return to business as usual once you're free of pain, you are more than likely to wind up in pain again after one or two training sessions, simply because you haven't done anything to make the tendon stronger before reintroducing the same stressful stimulus that you weren't ready for in the first place. The same goes for massage guns, dry needling, manual therapy and other expensive passive treatments. Rest reduced the symptoms, without addressing the cause. If anything, the time spent resting only facilitated further atrophy of the muscles that support the knee.

A decent rehab protocol would roughly involve decreasing the frequency, volume and intensity of the plyometric load on the tendon to whatever extent that does not cause pain (i.e. stop going ham with your training), then progressively and incrementally regain strength and function so the muscles and tendons are better equipped to deal with the demands of parkour. Once you're robust enough to handle the loads you're putting on your body and do not regularly exceed your tissue's fatigue capacity, your parkour training sessions will make you stronger rather than leave you in pain.

In Craig Teale's case, we know he went all-in to emulate the height drops in the videos of the time. Without a gradual ramp-up to exposing his body to such high landing forces, it was too much, too

soon for his knees. This, combined with how often he was subjecting his body to this stress – not allowing the body to recover from each session – compounded the degeneration of the passive structures of the knee to the point where the body said no. This is not a matter of height drops being inherently bad, but rather a matter of poor load management.

In July 2021, Capstone released its debut video, *CAPSTONE AUSTRALIA*. The video showcased a handful of Aussies (plus Tim Champion) doing gnarly shit at their physical and mental limits. It showed Justin Louey and Michael Khedoori even going for the furthest level and downward arm jumps anyone had seen, and they weren't even making them. They either came up short and violently bounced off the face of the walls, or the landing force caused their hands to peel off from the top of the wall. Perhaps most controversial were the unholy height drops, most notably in Khedoori's line, where on the last drop, he bottoms out into an ugly-looking full squat, with his butt to his ankles, without planting his hands down on the ground, from a ridiculous height. As expected, several parkourists were in the comments condemning the height drops, saying how they're destined for injury, and they're a bad influence for putting such reckless drops on a pedestal. People were undoubtedly projecting their training experience onto these Aussie weapons, which doesn't make much sense, especially in Dom and Kheedori's case.

As we've touched on before, when parkour expanded beyond France in 2003, most of the limited parkour media online featured big height drops. Newbies naively tried to emulate, and many eggs were broken. This is what spurred Chris Rowat to write his 2007 article, "*Dilution.*" For many in the community, height drops became less cool and were often shunned as dumb and reckless. So they stopped being progressed by the community at large, and instead, we focused on the scale of horizontal trajectory jumps rather than vertical, like big running precisions, even though overreaching beyond your body's capabilities with jumps for distance can be just as destructive. But still, only the downward vertical trajectories of height drops were stigmatised.

However, height drops were never wholly condemned; doing massive drops without a gradual linear progression leading up to them was reckless and stupid—drops that are too high, too soon. In David Belle's video *Speed Air Man*, a compilation of clips filmed around 1997-1998, he had already been training for about 10 years. The strength and mental fortitude exhibited in the video left all the purists in awe. So why do purists and idiots slate the Dom and Khedoori drops today? It makes little sense to condemn the drops in *CAPSTONE AUSTRALIA* when we know they have countless years of training behind them, just as David did in his video. Unlike the noobs of 2003-2007, their physiology is more adapted to that kind of abrupt force than any other humans. People saying, "You're gonna fuck up your knees, bro", can be compared to the typical layperson ignorantly spouting, "You're gonna break your bloody neck doing that!" They are both projections of their fears and lack of experience, which are irrelevant to someone else whose entire history and training process are vastly different from their own.

Height drops are, without any doubt, impressive. For a human body to develop the force-generating capabilities and joint robustness to withstand forces multiple times its body weight is an incredible athletic feat—one that is somewhat unique to parkour. The process and commitment that have shaped these specific skills should be celebrated. This is precisely why Laurent Piemontesi of the Yamakasi congratulated Naoki Ishiyama from Japan after his 7-metre cat pass height drop instead of calling him a reckless fool. He knows Naoki and appreciates that the drop was a product of around 15 years of work.

Despite enjoying supporting my parkour with strength training, I see something special in how we've reached such levels of athleticism and intuitively pushed human physical potential by fumbling through trial and error without needing elite strength and conditioning coaches. We street rats demonstrate to the world the brilliant resilience and adaptability of the human body.

The same neurotic professionals barking about "orthopaedic cost" will be the ones fear-mongering people into avoiding loading various postures and positions, such as spinal flexion and deep squats.

These erroneous narratives dominating the online space gave rise to Greg Lehman's *Movement Optimism*, which is a movement within the fitness and rehab industry that stands in stark opposition to those who misunderstand the body's incredible ability to adapt. I see parkour as a fantastic poster child for Movement Optimism. The messy variability and imperfect height drops fly in the face of the fear-inducing norms of "perfect form." We land ugly, only take off our preferred leg, and regularly take drops in ways that would make other elite athletes' knees explode. Yet, many of us are now in our mid-thirties, having trained non-stop for twenty years, and are still going strong.

If we can keenly listen to our bodies and train accordingly, we may keep the train rolling for another few decades. Maybe doing parkour whilst adhering to basic load management principles is a recipe for peak joint health.

Creativity

Creativity is essential, although commonly misrepresented. It doesn't only apply to parkourists' styles that are more on the freerunning side of the spectrum, as some are quick to assume. Or what's seen as more contemporary, for that matter. Something I find hilarious is when someone says, "Hmm, nope. This isn't a creative parkour spot." This suggests two things:

1. They have a close-minded idea of creativity associated with a particular style—perhaps breakdance-derived inverted twisty moves, usually using a single ledge, maybe with a knee or toe hook.

2. They are not creative; if they were, they would at least be able to put something together at any spot.

Creativity happens whenever you imagine applying movement to a space or obstacle. As well as when building upon or deconstructing pre-existing techniques and ideas. The ability to read the environment and recognise affordances is integral to parkour.

I don't believe creativity is in the actions themselves. Instead, creativity is the ideas and imagination that manifest in actions. We know copying someone else's creative idea is not creative. This is why it can be annoying when your mate copies your line during training,

uploads it before you do, and takes creative credit. Or even worse, the same line but with a cart full at the end. It's fine when a mate is learning and building upon their skills by replicating your difficult creation because it is technically challenging for them, which builds their craft. Still, it does feel like a minor betrayal watching someone else receive praise for your "intellectual property". Similarly, if a friend verbally puts a line together for you at a spot, and you execute it, film it and upload it, that line is a product of your friend's creativity, not yours. Some may even consider certain single moves to be creative, for example, a cork zero. Although they're exceedingly difficult to execute, a pre-established move such as the cork zero can hardly be dubbed as inherently creative, purely by the fact that nothing new has been created. If someone were to combine a cork zero with a cat leap or a chimney slide, it would be a leap in creativity. Still, it holds that if a friend suggested the idea, the person doing the new and extremely difficult combination is not responsible for the creative leap.

We often attempt to measure creativity, not only in judging competitions but also in casual conversation. When thinking about what is innovative and the varying degrees of creativity, it's important to understand that every idea comes from somewhere; no idea simply sprouts into existence in a vacuum. What may seem an original idea invariably had its source elsewhere. In Rick Rubin's book *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, he explains:

> "This content does not come from inside us. The Source is out there. A wisdom surrounding us, an inexhaustible offering that is always available. We either sense it, remember it, or tune into it. To the mind, this material appears to come from within. But that's an illusion. There are tiny fragments of the vastness of Source stored within us. These precious wisps arise from the unconscious like vapour, and condense to form a thought. An idea."

All ideas are built upon other ideas consciously or unconsciously consumed. Higher degrees of creativity are when that prior idea is morphed into something less recognisable and applied to an unusual

obstacle. With this in mind, it's challenging to have high degrees of creativity given how we consume parkour media today, even though the community seems more innovative than ever. We are exposed to so much *Source*. Just because there are more ideas and people are interacting with obstacles in a much broader way doesn't mean we, as a community, now have higher levels of creativity than ever before. We can view everything the international community does after it's filmed online. With such a rich wellspring of ideas and inspiration and such a rapid turnaround, it's easy to see new stuff all the time, which makes it seem like everyone is being so creative. Still, it's all informed by the prior ideas of the collective consciousness of the parkour community, connected by the internet. Even entirely new branches of our skill tree that seem like quantum leaps in creativity have been extracted from a source, although occasionally outside our sport. As mentioned, Beans drew inspiration from skiing and rollerblading, while Matt McCreary and Charles Auguste drew inspiration from contemporary dance. These examples exhibit higher levels of creativity to an extent, as applying the source inspiration to a parkour context is unexpected, subversive, and challenges many of the norms of our sport. Yet, these examples still undeniably have a source.

Imagine a hypothetical parkourist practising in a vacuum. They are always at the best spot or gym you can imagine, and the only piece of parkour media they have seen for inspiration is David Belle's *Speed Air Man*. I would argue that everything this person does in that vacuum to build upon prior ideas, although technically far less complex, is just as creative as the most complex movement you can see online today. With this in mind, it certainly makes you respect the creativity of our French founders more. Their training in Lisses and Évry in the early 90s likely had the highest degrees of creativity in a vacuum. They were figuring it out independently, without the infinite supply of Source we have at our fingertips today.

I often find it funny to imagine gathering the most creative parkourists of today, like Sebastián Dratva, Matt McCreary, Bjarke Hellden, Elias Zimakoff, Camila Stefaniu, Egg, Shirai, Ross Allen, Matthias Mayer, Lisa Eckert or Joe Scandrett, and sending them back in time to train with the guys in Lisses and Évry around the turn of

the millennium. Or even to IMAX in 2004. It's hard to decide whether they would be heralded as gods or burned at the stake for being some freakish alien entities. Everyone training today is standing atop the shoulders of giants. None of the movement we call creative today would be possible without the wellspring of video information at our disposal.

Maybe you'll agree that a better word might be *vision*. We've always used this word: *Parkour vision* or *PK vision*. Street skaters also have the phrase, the 'skater's eye'. The more we train, spend time around parkour, and consume parkour media, the broader our vision becomes. It's also not as simple as synthesis by what you view; you must be willing to experiment, tinker, play, and accept that you will look a fool when figuring things out. It will make sense to parkourists who understand the process of tinkering to cook up a funky line, but to the public passing by, watching the process unfold can look utterly bat-shit crazy, especially when you consider that most of what people see online is the polished and spectacular final product.

Matt McCreary tells a story on the Storror Podcast about training alone in Hamburg. "I was outside some apartment blocks, experimenting with a strange roll along a slant, and I was still in the development stage, so it was just me rolling like a sausage a couple of times and trying to jump off." An inquisitive old gentleman emerges from the flats and asks if he could stay and watch. McCreary replies, "Sure. What I'm doing will look extremely strange because I'm trying to figure something out." The old gent replies, "Yeah, no worries." McCreary performs his roly-poly sausage move, stops, and turns to the man, for him to laugh in Matt's face, unable to contain himself, before wandering off to go about his day.

Bearing in mind that Matt McCreary is a world-class parkourist and one of our prized revolutionary innovators, he likely appeared to this man as someone fumbling through their first week of training. It helps to develop a thick skin when adopting this training style, especially when out solo. It will always be easier when moving with a group of like-minded parkourists. Not only are you insulated from the judgmental eyes of pedestrians, but you can playfully bounce ideas off each other. These environments can be a goldmine for creativity and innovation. As Robert Henri said, "The object isn't to make art; it's to

be in that wonderful state which makes art inevitable." Similarly, Rick Rubin claims, "The answer is not to look for it. Nor do we predict or analyse our way into it. Instead, we create an open space that allows it."

How can we better promote environments for our communities to freely explore collaboratively? Kevin Franzen holds workshops focused on creating this space. And much of it results in a lot of laughter, funky new ideas, knees getting bonked (mine), and people shedding their fear of looking dumb in front of their peers.

The more you tinker, play and excavate in rabbit holes of various movements on various obstacles, the more opportunities will present themselves in any environment. This is the cycle of how ideas inform action, and actions inform ideas. A broad parkour vision enables us to see extensive possibilities for interacting with our environment. Low degrees of parkour vision will lead you to be the annoying guy who sees only the obvious kong pre at a spot and says, "Guys, can we move on? This spot sucks! There's nothing to do!"

Expression

The word *"expression"* came up a lot from the poll respondents. Like, a lot! It is a hard one to unpack. Expression can be defined as the act of making one's thoughts or feelings known. Or a display of emotion without words. It may differ significantly between individuals in how expressive we feel when moving. You may intend to express yourself through movement, but others might not. Still, your movement can unintentionally convey something to an onlooker. So, is expression both intentionally and unintentionally making one's thoughts and feelings known? Either way, what array of feelings and thoughts can movement possibly portray? Or is it something that transcends words? Maybe the movement provides a distinctly new language where each move is a word, and a complete line is a sentence, then when it's strung together with such finesse, it's poetry. Is someone purely doing hard stuff only to do hard stuff, being expressive without intending to be?

Maybe, like all art, the meaning is in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps it's as simple as expressing how you feel like moving and

interacting with space at a given time. An expression of the ideas that a space pulls out of you. In a blog post entitled *Abstract expression, or: what can parkour express*, Matthias Mayer wrote, "Parkour is expressing that which makes you feel like doing parkour."

A great Bruce Lee quote from his book, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, reads, "Creation and art is the psychic unfolding of the personality."

I don't believe everyone who falls into a particular aspect of parkour does so purely because it best suits their natural talents. This may be the case for some. For example, someone naturally excels at big standing jumps, receives praise from peers or strangers on social media, and continues down that rabbit hole. However, perhaps many people are attracted to specific aspects or styles because they align with aspects of their personality. It could be interesting to conduct a study by collecting a large number of parkourists' personality test results and comparing them with their styles to see whether there are any correlations. Fuck it, why not also try with star signs while we're at it! Maybe it's simply what we're good at. Perhaps it's purely taste. Or maybe it's the psychic unfolding of our personality expressed through movement.

A to B & Efficient

Yes, that old chestnut again. Let's finally put this one to bed, shall we? I realise it may seem from previous chapters that I have nothing but unwavering disdain for practical, efficient, reach/escape, A-to-B style parkour, but that's quite far from the truth. I've always loved that style of movement, and its look and feel. I enjoy watching and doing rapid runs that cover long expanses of complex terrain. I enjoy spectating and partaking in speed competitions as much as the next guy who sucks at flips. I was the dweeby, bowl-cut, skinny kid in Teige's legendary 2009 video *Jangerary*, chasing him and having my hands pried off a wall at the top of a wall run. In 2010 and 2011, off the back of my *Tootsies Video*, I was selected to participate in two different purist-style community video projects because of the fast style I gravitated toward at the time.

If you haven't realised by now, my beef is not with A-to-B efficiency or those who put time and energy into that field; my beef is

with anyone maintaining the idea that it's the sole defining core characteristic of our practice, rather than people doing sick shit with their body in their environment. In fact, maybe we should just make "people doing sick shit with their body in their environment" the definition!

For any beginner, attempting to cover ground across various obstacles and terrains is likely the most effective way to naturally develop the fundamentals. These fundamentals can be the base of the pyramid on which to build everything else, like musicians learning scales and chords before going on to play jazz. Creating lines that directly cross a space is a great way to make use of the skills you've learned practising parkour and to build on the skills you already have. Having a skill set of useful moves undoubtedly grants you the freedom to navigate any environment and explore areas others cannot. The ability to use your skills in dire situations where you could save yourself or someone else can be an invaluable lifeline if you should need it. And you will most definitely pick up many skills that will be useful, whether utility is your intention or not. But the chances are that the direst situations where you'll use your skills are when you're desperate to use the toilet, running late for an appointment, or rushing to catch a bus. It may help you take shortcuts and save a few seconds when walking around town. It may prove worthwhile when you've locked yourself out of your house, but a first-storey bathroom window is open. Ryan Ford said on a Threads post:

> "Put your kids in parkour AND combat sports so that they're empowered to GTFO instead of fighting someone bigger, stronger, armed with a knife or gun. The main goal should be to escape unharmed rather than risk injury or death through combat. Teach your kids how to strategically flee to safety, first and foremost, but also prepare them to fight if necessary. Parkour skills as self-preservation should supersede combat skills as self-defence."

There's undoubtedly some sound logic here. I agree that removing yourself from the situation can be better than fighting, unless you are

with someone who cannot defend themselves and needs protection. There could be an untapped market in parkour coaching for this underrepresented branch of self-defence, which could be valuable for people and attract more people to parkour (as long as it's not the only idea sold under the umbrella of parkour). However, I'd say there are forms of conflict resolution and avoidance that supersede both combat and fleeing. De-escalation, situational awareness, and threat assessment are likely safer than the two combined, no matter how good you are. Situations like these are chaotic and unpredictable, and if you're chased, it likely won't pan out like your favourite parkour chase scene in action movies. And it certainly won't go as smoothly as the perfectly choreographed and rehearsed lines from your training. David Belle's character, Leto, in District 13, escaped Taha's goons because he knew the banlieue like the back of his hand. And not to mention, it's a work of fiction.

Now, let's imagine a hypothetical scenario of Ryan Ford being chased, manically running around an unknown area without obstacles in his path to slow his multiple pursuers down, and any obstacles he has encountered, they've made short work of by simply navigating around them. He tries to vault over one handrail, but it unexpectedly gives way under his weight, sending him crashing onto his coccyx. He quickly gets back onto his feet and darts off in a random direction. They are hot on his heels now, and to Ford's rotten luck, it's become evident that the assailants he pissed off are all elite HYROX athletes, and his poor aerobic endurance can't compete. Ford sees a courtyard offering some higher ground and attempts to wall pop up an eight-foot wall to put more distance between himself and his nimble, tenacious pursuers. However, because it's nighttime, he fails to see that the wall is pebble-dashed, and as he plants his foot, he slips, body-plants the wall, and only narrowly grasps the top of the ledge. Just before one of his foes grabs his dangling legs, Ford makes a desperate and laboured climb up, gasping for air as his legs burn and feel heavy with lactic acid. The enraged HYROX athletes lose very little time, finding some stairs to the courtyard around a corner. Ford makes a desperate turn into a dark alleyway and finds himself helplessly cornered by the lithe and agile band of Camelbak-wearing athletes. The towering walls surrounding him are bare and

featureless. With no drainpipes to climb or fences to put between them, he is hopelessly trapped. The time for de-escalation has long passed, and Ford's assailants are further agitated for having to chase him down despite the excuse for an additional cardio workout. As they encircle him like a ravenous pack of Fitbit-wearing wolves, his past twenty years of dedicated parkour training flash before his eyes. Ryan Ford is then beaten severely by several HYROX athletes.

It's not quite the exhilarating work of fiction that District 13 is. Still, it may be a more realistic scenario – especially with the rampant rise in HYROX popularity – and it does paint a picture of how chaotic and unpredictable situations such as these can be. If you choose either fight or flight, both can work, but you're rolling the dice more than utilising de-escalation, situational awareness, and threat assessment first and foremost.

Suppose you genuinely want to embody and live by Georges Hébert's altruistic notion of *être fort, pour être utile* (be strong to be useful). In that case, I'd argue that it's likely better to find a job that contributes to society and positively affects lives, give spare change and food to homeless people, volunteer at food banks, support charities, pay taxes (Fun fact: Raymond Belle never paid taxes, according to his son's book. Which is ironic considering his wages throughout his life were paid by the state being a public servant), and if you somehow accumulate some wealth, maybe spread it around to your friends who are struggling to pay their rent or build a parkour gym or two, rather than buying self-gratifying expensive watches, flash cars, Balenciaga clothing, or other shallow material symbols of wealth people need to fit in with other vapid and stinking rich tossers.

Being strong to be useful in this day and age might even look more like having a large Instagram following. This allows you to reach more people with your posts and stories that speak out against social injustice and support current global crises, charity fundraisers, or local businesses. Maybe the parkour influencers had it right all along by aimlessly amassing their online following. However, most of them just keep posting thoughtless, viral, hungry trash and shy away from touching anything political in fear of losing followers.

These examples might be slightly more *useful* than being a sweaty and smelly bum, hanging around on street corners, practising wall runs or spending hours crawling up and down stairs, hoping one day they'll be around to use their skills like the fantastic hero they envision themselves to be—as if a fire broke out in a nearby building, they wouldn't shit their pants, and wait for the fire brigade to arrive while filming on their phone like everyone else.

Coming back to David Belle, I think he liked the idea of being strong and useful like his father, but who knows whether he ever was. In his book, he shares many romantic sentiments about valour and chivalry while also expressing deep cynicism about people and civilisation, even verging on misanthropy. I never heard anything about him ever saving anyone, helping with any humanitarian crises or anything of the sort. David often mentions that his training might be useful one day to climb and rescue someone from the balcony of a burning building, as if he'll somehow be able to carry them back down the same climb. Did he also train to fireman carry people down from balconies, or did he only think as far as reaching the distressed person, which would only result in both of them burning to a crisp?

David seemed ambivalent about pursuing a noble career path like his father's. He quit the military because, supposedly, it wasn't challenging enough and never returned to the fire brigade after breaking his arm in training. He explains in his book:

> "When I was with the firefighters, I realised that my father had already done it all. When I was walking in his footsteps, breaking the regiment's record in rope climbing the same way he did, I felt nothing glorious about it. I just think I didn't want to live my father's life: he had already done it all, in the army or with the firemen, and probably better than I did or ever would do, so I had to find my own professional path."

If his core guiding principle was gaining skills to help people, why should it matter if it's a path already trodden? Why does carving out one's professional path have anything to do with being useful? Capitalising on his skills for movies is undoubtedly a far less altruistic

path. I think it's fair to judge that these altruistic ideas for David were no more than romantic. Evidently, the main thing David was getting strong for was a pat on the back from his father.

A similar argument can be made for those who claimed to train for usefulness. Why is it so difficult for some to admit that they just think it's cool to be able to move well? Why is there a need for some ulterior, grandiose, overarching altruistic excuse? Is enjoying pushing personal creative, technical, physical and mental limits not enough? In the immortal words of legendary Yosemite rock climber Royal Robbins, "The beautiful thing about climbing to me is you can't justify it. It doesn't pretend to be anything useful." For most of us, it needs no external justification; its purpose is not to be useful or productive in a conventional sense, but to be an end in itself.

Once again, the practical and efficient movement was a massive part of parkour's history, philosophy and identity. And I'm sure there are many old dinosaurs out there who mourn the loss of David Belle's utilitarian philosophy and have become apathetic towards what parkour has become. Still, as we should know by now, it's far from what is, and what has always been, truly representative of the whole picture. Parkour can be that – and it would be a dramatic loss if the fast and efficient terrain crossing style were to fade entirely – but it's more than that. And that's a good thing.

Improve, Limits & Overcoming

Like many activities, parkour is focused on pushing and overcoming personal limits. However, the parkour community certainly puts much more emphasis on the *personal* aspect. That is mainly due to the sport's broad scope. Parkour is very much an individual pursuit.

What does it even mean to get better at parkour? It doesn't seem easy to find a universal spectrum for *better*. And more elusive is perhaps the idea of a tangible end goal. Author James Carse would describe parkour as an *infinite game* instead of a finite one. Although not just one game, parkour houses multiple. Given that the movement skills used in parkour are so broad and far-reaching, which can be performed and developed on a seemingly endless variety of obstacles, one could pursue so many avenues of speciality. At the same time,

some aspects could be neglected. People who use terms like *better* or *worse* about a parkourist against another likely miss the broader picture that one parkourist's specialities can be another's weaknesses. It's easier to gauge who excels at a particular skill or who might do better in a specific competition format, and it's often a fun topic of conversation. Still, there's no way of measuring whether someone like Ed Scott is better than someone like Tim Champion in any general sense. Or Lisa Schneider and Lisa Eckert. Or Cristian Aldana and Stanislav Lazdan. Or Renae Dambly and Sydney Olsen. And to be frank, nor should we care. If it were easier to pin down a measurable general skill level, maybe more would engage in crude conversations comparing parkourists to others. But because it's tough to measure overall skill level, we tend to gauge our skill level and rate of improvement against ourselves. It's also a much less corrosive attitude. People trying to help one another is more common than *a shutdown* culture with heaps of smack talk and online beef, as seen in other sports. Usually, subjective effort is praised rather than the actual objective achievements themselves. In-person, anyway. Perhaps less so online.

Parkour is not something where improving only means bigger jumps and acquiring new techniques. Improvement is also about making things that used to be very difficult easier than before—pushing your limits and building more comfort within and at the edge of them. The move you are improving may even look the same, but if the internal process leading to the outcome is more refined and streamlined, that is also an indicator of improvement. However, if we put too much stock in the objective final product rather than the internal mechanisms being honed, we may be doing ourselves a disservice. Going out and finding increasingly bigger things for Instagram may seem like the most valuable use of your training time for your online presence as a parkour influencer, but it may not be the best thing for your practice.

Challenges

Challenge is a word that cannot be ignored. I would characterise a considerable bulk of many parkourists' training as finding and

working on challenges in any environment. In fact, that's often been my answer when pedestrians ask what parkour is. It can be a concise and straightforward way to sum up how many of us train. The sense of fulfilment from overcoming a hard challenge is what keeps us coming back. Especially when it's a project that we've worked on for hours, days or even years to achieve. It's not, however, only about reaching the end goal; it's about viewing movement problems as a joy to overcome. A mindset that embraces challenges and turns them into fuel for growth and joy is a cornerstone of our collective identity. However, lumping everyone into that category is still lazy and inaccurate. Overcoming mental, physical and technical challenges is undoubtedly the lifeblood of parkour, but what we do is also more than that.

Art & Style

Creating a line doesn't necessarily need to be especially challenging. Some of us train with a particular emphasis on *art* and *style* to create something incredible to watch and massively satisfying to do in the moment. There's no ignoring how much we refer to what we do as art. Let's not forget our first official name, *L'Art Du Déplacement*—the art of movement, and how in the first-ever televised piece of documented parkour media, the Stade 2 news feature of 1997, David's first sentence refers to what they're doing as an art: "Every single obstacle is taking part in our art."

We cannot deny that aesthetics play a huge role in parkour. Anyone who knows Pedro León Gómez (AKA Phosky) knows that his movement style was nothing short of pure art. For Phosky, everything had to be a certain way. We joked numerous times about how doing the same vault two or three times in a row is just plain *un-Spanish*. This wasn't necessarily to put rules on something, but more to create a certain feel and aesthetic to the movement he wanted to create and be his own—a standard he held himself to, to be fully content with a line's aesthetic completion. Although Phosky's movement may seem fairly formulaic, you could never get tired of watching. Every landing had to be picture-perfect, and every connection, vault, and step in a line had to be purposeful, seamless, and flowing like water. And you

can ask anyone who they think looked best in baggy pants, and they will quickly say Phosky. That's because it significantly complemented the fluid aesthetic he was after, and no one can deny that it worked magnificently. Phosky moving in a skin-tight latex suit may still look good – it may even look better for some if that's what they're into – but it wouldn't have the same recognisable Phosky essence. Clothing certainly affects one's style. Your body is the instrument for your art, so it makes sense to dress in a way that helps create the shapes and image you envisage.

There are many clear and undeniable examples of artists in our sport: Nico Vanhole, Pasha Petkuns, Charles Auguste, Lisa Eckert, Oleg Vorslav, Minh Vu Ngoc, Joseph Marx, Matt McCreary, Shirai, Naël, Lisa Schneider, Matthias Mayer, and Camila Stefaniu all have unique artistic styles. You can see from how they move that their intention extends beyond only the challenge, but also to the inventive and visually appealing final product. However, not just those with an intentional aesthetic style should be considered artistic. Even those whose movement visually appears to be for speed, efficiency and covering ground almost always focus on aesthetics.

Matthias Mayer expressed it phenomenally well in his fourth PK Theory video—albeit slightly confusingly. He explained, "Functionality plays an aesthetic function. The aesthetic function is primary, and the functionality function is secondary. I think the same thing counts for all parkour people. Which would make parkour and freerunning the same thing, with a different stylistic outlook."

And there you have the truth, everybody! Never have I heard it expressed better than that. Reread it if you have to. Bravo, Matthias! This reminds me of a term I've heard floating around: fast-thetic, meaning the aesthetic of speed. This doesn't only apply to seemingly practical movement, either. Parkourists who use many flips and tricks, like George McGowan and Elis Torhall, all seem to aim for fast-thetic lines, linking moves with aggressively elastic power.

How something looks, whether that's how clean or fast it is, or the choice of moves, all contribute to the aesthetics and style of the movement as a satisfactory final piece. This is why we tend to watch back our footage from the day, over and over, with a great deal of glee or scrutiny. We all aim for our movement to look a certain way. We all

love watching videos of others who move well. This may be why most parkourists prefer third-person videos to POV videos. However, many non-parkour folk seem to prefer POV videos. It is more immersive because it puts them in our shoes, thus inducing a stronger emotional response, especially when at height. The layperson is less likely to appreciate all the subtle details of shapes and flow when watching a body move through space from a third-person perspective, whereas we lap it up and can differentiate minor things, like snobbish movement connoisseurs.

We each have our own preferences for practising and watching different styles. As consumers of movement media, everyone has different tastes. Some will love seeing very precise, controlled jumps, whereas others may see them as robotic and lacking soul. Some others may think a perfectly connected sequence of off-axis tricks flowing down consecutive ledges is a thing of beauty, whereas others may see it as something air-fairy and lacking substance. Sam Coppack made a decent analogy, comparing movement styles to musical genres. Some like hip hop, some like metal, some prefer jazz, and some prefer funk. Those with a more eclectic taste in "music" will have a great time no matter what is "playing".

Not only do we all have certain levels of aesthetic standards and genres of movement that call to us, but it's practically impossible for each individual not to have their unique movement style. I don't just mean the avenues of specialisation each of us gravitates toward, but also the unique variations in our anthropometrics; how we are built anatomically affects subtle, or often blatant, movement differences. Beyond this, from a motor control standpoint, we all learn techniques and ingrain motor pathways differently, creating what Sam Coppack calls movement mannerisms. This makes it inevitable that we each move in a unique way.

We all have a style, whether we like it or not. If overcoming mental, physical, and technical challenges is the lifeblood of parkour, then art and style are the heart that pumps it through the veins.

The Moment of Truth

Right then! Now that we've put in perhaps as much groundwork as possible after dissecting all the words from our supremely "scientific standard" Instagram corpus. It's time that we sow it all together.

Drumroll, please! Without further ado, I present to you my new and improved definition of parkour:

> **Parkour** (/pɑːˈkʊə/) noun
> Parkour is a self-led movement practice where practitioners use only the abilities of their bodies to interact with obstacles of any given environment, with aims to create and/or overcome mental, technical and physical challenges, whether by short bursts of movement or long and complex sequences, including but not limited to, forms of jumping, swinging, climbing, vaulting and rotations on any axis. Whether the intention is for utility or the expression of an artistic style, improving and building upon personal limits are at the core of the practice.

So there you have it! That wasn't so hard. Despite being a little wordy and clunky, this definition is far more descriptive and serves as an umbrella for our rich, ambiguous movement practice. Although we may all train differently, I trust we can all agree that the above houses us all under one roof. Although it may unite us all under one banner of movement, people will continue to find ways to fit what we do into the world in their own way.

As sports, practices, and numerous other fields naturally evolve over time, various external influences pull upon them in one way or another. One of these prime immovable forces is capitalism; another is social capital. Goliath multinational corporations and century-old sports federations, in tandem with the International Olympic Committee, wield budgets that dwarf those of our grassroots. This grants them enormous power over our professionals, making them a dominant influence on mainstream perceptions of the sport and culture. With professionals amassing online audiences

comparable to those of pop stars, shaping public perception is also within our hands. However, the social media arms race can also erode positive mainstream perceptions in various ways. These external forces also shape parkourists' relationship to their sport, turning what was once intrinsically valuable into an empty commodity. Worst of all, modernity is pulling society toward mass sedentariness, where not only is the average person less likely to take up something like parkour, but also less inclined to move at all.

Pinning down parkour as it manifests physically is only part of the battle for how to fit it into society. This is why we've arrived at this new, objectively descriptive definition, yet more than half the book's contents are still sitting in your right hand. The identity crisis is far bigger than the definition. My friends, we still have work to do.

PART TWO

Chapter 13 - Parkour Industry

In 2026, parkour has now been around long enough to prove to our parents that it is not just a phase. It has become established enough that it can no longer be assumed to be another internet trend that will eventually fizzle out as the next thing comes along. The founders' niche childhood games have grown to shape many lives. Thousands of people worldwide have had parkour at the forefront of their lives for many years. It has consistently been an online sensation; it seems like someone's content goes viral every week, which, when not rage-baiting non-parkour folk into leaving mean comments, can often light sparks for more people to seek out a community in their area and start training. Then, these newcomers have access to endless hours of video and tutorial content to learn from. It has appeared in numerous box-office movies and mainstream video games. The International Olympic Committee has its hawkish eye on parkour as a potential Olympic sport, and we cannot deny that this is a significant development in the sport's acceptance. Hundreds of parkour gyms and academies are scattered across the globe, with classes available for the young, the old, and everyone in between. It has no doubt become an industry. Although funnily enough, if you had uttered the words *parkour industry* to the average "traceur" fifteen to twenty years ago, they would have raised an eyebrow. Some of the more pious and orthodox may have gone so far as to attempt to burn you upon the pyre as a heretic.

Callow Anticapitalists & Opportunistic Outliers

Many early practitioners opposed the idea of profiting from parkour, especially if it led to its increasing commercialisation and commodification. They wanted parkour to remain pure and unspoiled by money, greed, and the troubles commercialisation tends to bring. This seems tremendously naive when considering the founders, whom the early practitioners adored devoutly, starred in numerous high-

budget films and huge corporate commercials. And it's even more naive considering how these media pieces encouraged the commercialisation-hating purists to start parkour in the first place. Even sharing parkour through coaching initially received vehement pushback. As soon as you charged someone for the honest trade of teaching someone, you were deemed immoral for monetising such a budding and pure art form.

Before Parkour Generations in London in 2005, Apex Movement in Colorado in 2006, Parkour Visions in Seattle in 2007, and the ADAPT certifications established in cooperation with four of the founders in 2008, there were only free mentorships like those of the early French parkourists. So many seemed militantly anti-capitalist. I assume much of it was simply teenage naivety; unable to tell the difference between their niece's lemonade stand and the large gears in the capitalist machine that owns the means of production and exploits workers to maximise profits. Capitalism undeniably has its issues. Some may go further, saying that it's at the core of the rot in society. But it's hard to imagine that any of these nicknamed, spiky-gelled-haired, sweatband-wearing 00s teens had any intellectual substance behind their arguments.

Urban Freeflow and American Parkour were the two groups that initially received the most pushback. They were seen as opportunistic and overly commercially minded, most of which were things that we wouldn't bat an eye at today. However, Urban Freeflow was undeniably responsible for some shady doings, such as extorting the naive teenage talent under the brand and actively monopolising the entire industry during parkour's first big wave of popularity. After Jump London in 2003, Urban Freeflow did its best to gain a firm stranglehold on the influx of media attention and financial opportunities, latching onto the ripe new phenomenon as if it were its own. In UF's golden era between 2004 and 2010, they worked with more big corporate clients on commercial campaigns and various performance events than any other parkour brand, by a substantial margin. Even to date, maybe. However, most of UF's income went to the reprehensible, conniving Paul Corkery (AKA EZ).

They opened a sponsorship programme where young, ambitious runts could submit videos, and if their skills seemed up to scratch and marketable, they would be brought into the fold. Their commercial success was flaunted online, making them the pinnacle of financial opportunity in the community's eyes. However, the poor teenagers didn't know that the older head honcho, Paul Corkery, would hoard the lion's share of the money from all performance, stunt and media work. And the profits from their colossal clothing business.

UF dominated parkour's image so much that some assumed their *glyph* logo meant parkour. It didn't mean anything. Some lines were simply slapped together to emulate characters from the Chinese or Japanese writing systems. This was doubly confusing, given that parkour has its roots in France, not the Far East (at a stretch, Vietnam). They were the first to print and sell merchandise with various designs, although the glyph T-shirt was by far the most popular and was available in every colour of the rainbow. I remember doodling the glyph over all my school textbooks when I knew no better. But that's not half as bad as the many who got the glyph tattooed. And a few with *parkour* or *PK* written underneath as if that's what it means, rather than the logo of a sketchy company run by a sketchy ex-boxer. This was all no more than a consequence of A-star marketing. The glyph can be seen on clothing in Julie Angel's 2006 documentary *Le Singe est de Retour* (*The Monkey's Back*), featuring Stephane Vigroux. Francois "Forrest" Mahop and Dan Edwardes were still involved with Urban Freeflow during filming, but soon after left to form Parkour Generations with Vigroux. However, in Angel's 2010 re-upload of the doc, all glyphs on their clothing had been covered up with a small black square. Frame by frame, occasionally on a moving subject, Angel had gone through painstaking lengths to erase any association with UF. My heart goes out to those left with glyph tattoos, especially with what occurred later in Corkery's story. Sadly, Julie Angel can't simply edit the tattoos out.

UF's decline began in 2009 when a handful of its team's roster wised up to Corkery's misdeeds. After realising they had built enough of a personal platform, they wouldn't rely on their leech of a manager to find work any longer. After the televised Barclaycard-sponsored

Freerunning World Championships, UF's most established members stepped down. Timothy Shieff, Ashley Holland, Jan Barcikowski, Franck "Cali" Nelle and Paul "Blue" Joseph all went on to create Storm Freerun, which established itself as the new commercially-driven team on the block with their polished, professionally shot and edited debut video *Storm Freerun - Volume 1*.

UF slowly began clawing back support in 2010-2011 with their community-focused *Jump Magazine*. It was an online magazine featuring interviews with the likes of Daniel Ilabaca, Sébastian Foucan, Kie Willis, and Mike Christie, while also spotlighting lesser-known communities around the globe. In two years, they released twenty-two issues. Corkery seemed to steer the brand in a new positive direction, and the community's animosity slowly began to soften. Although behind the scenes, his self-serving, extortionist habits persisted among the new teenagers he roped in.

In 2011, UF held the first online submission competition, the FR World Series. No matter where you were in the world, you could submit a minute-worth of movement to win a cash prize. This revolutionary idea sparked Red Bull to start similar online submissions for all subsequent Art Of Motion competitions. However, I must take some responsibility here—I was the first to upload a submission that made a mockery of the competition. My first line was running through an empty cow field, where the only obstacle interaction was hopping over a bucket of shit around thirty seconds in. My second line was a collection of poorly strung-together parkour cliches and faux pas, culminating in a terribly performed flat-back dive roll. All cut together with an overused Army of the Pharaohs song, which sampled the Pirates of the Caribbean soundtrack. My video seemed to open the floodgates for countless other parody submissions by parkourists wanting to take an easy jab at Urban Freeflow. Respected names like Jason Paul, Toby Segar, Josh Burnett-Blake, Max Henry, Max Runham and Marvin Ross all uploaded side-splitting parody submissions. It reached a stage where the parodies outnumbered the serious submissions.

Not all joke submissions were necessarily taking a shot at Corkery in protest of his business ethics. Some jumped on the bandwagon purely for fun. However, in Josh Burnett-Blake's

submission, he left no room for ambiguity when he addressed Paul Corkery, saying, "He's bald, and he's a cunt." Months later, at a UF jam in London, Josh boldly approached Corkery with a camera in hand as a wilful act of antagonisation. Having apparently seen Josh's video submission, Corkery said, "I've got a bone to pick with you."

Josh further provoked him by sticking the camera in his face, which culminated in Corkery punching the camera and threatening to knock him out. Antagonising a tall, jacked ex-professional boxer in his forties is imprudently bold! The video was uploaded to Storror with the title "*EZ-ly annoyed...*"

The official FR World Series results were never announced. However, we at Storror took it into our own hands and hosted our very own unofficial results video. Max and Benj Cave, dressed in suits, sat at a newsroom-style table to review their top ten submissions, most of which were parodies, aside from one, which they just wanted to slander on air. When reviewing the late Callum Buchanan's submission, Max says, "This one's tricky. We didn't know if it was a joke or real, but I think we'll class it as a joke because it's pretty fucked up. The absolute talent to land on both heels after the 180."

Sure enough, the winner was Max and Benj's father, Terry Cave, with a stunning display of applying a coat of paint to a wall in their house. But the show didn't end there. Drew Taylor bursts onto the set wearing a pink swim cap and a shirt with a crudely drawn glyph logo with a penis as one of the shapes, shouting, "What the fuck are you doing?! I make the shots around here! I'm bald, and I'm a cunt! I'm the one who fucking runs this fucking FR World Series! I do! Fucking EZ!"

The penis glyph shirt is then furiously ripped down the centre like Hulk Hogan before the video abruptly ends. Possibly due to total apathy and disdain for the parkour community following this onslaught, Urban Freeflow fell silent, only later to rebrand entirely as a bodybuilding company called FLEXDEM.

Years after UF had fallen from grace, Jason Paul and some of Germany's Ashigaru team bought the company from Corkery, at a rumoured cost of around £10,000. They attempted to revivify the household name with a more ethical, grassroots community focus. The website hosted a handful of articles, but beyond this, it didn't

offer much. In 2018, they closed the site after a Facebook post explaining they were "too busy with their own businesses to keep up with the work necessary to maintain a project like UF."

This was perhaps a good call, given the brand's historical baggage. Especially in 2016, when a Surrey News article circulated through the community like wildfire, with the headline, "Frimley fitness photographer Paul Corkery found guilty of sexual offences during photoshoots." With one count of digital penetration and one count of sexual touching, he was sentenced to two years and placed on the sexual offenders' register, along with a ten-year ban from acting as a professional photographer without supervision.

Take Flight is another dubious brand from the US, run by the notoriously capitalistically-minded Adam Dunlap. Since its origin in 2008, Take Flight has set the bar high for what's been recognised as intolerable and near-fiendish business practices.

To name a few of his alleged transgressions: He bought the trademark for the word *parkour* so that other brands would have to go through him, paying a "small fee" to have it printed on merchandise. He copied multiple clothing designs from parkour and non-parkour brands, and also claimed in their marketing that they were the official clothing of parkour. He abused David Belle's image for the brand's gain and hijacked parkour.com from him. He wilfully dominated search engine results to capitalise on newbies. He stole people's photos to promote their clothing. He paid sponsored athletes as little as possible, often providing them with only their awful clothing. The straw that broke the camel's back was his buying up and hoarding website domain names of numerous pro parkourists, including Kie Willis, Daniel Ilabaca, Toby Segar, Mark Toorock and Tim Shieff. Beyond this, he also bought about 200 parkour-related domain names, costing him about $20,000. To add to the brazen audacity, the websites would redirect to the Take Flight website and store. In a 2012 interview with Alan Schexnayder, Dunlap claims, "I like domains and have plans for all the domains I've registered. Most of them are in dormant stages until we can develop them, so we just have them forwarded as appropriate for the time being."

It's ridiculously far-fetched that he would have plans to develop all two hundred parkour-related domains. What could he possibly do with damedulac.com, precisionjump.com, parkourforlife.com, gotparkour.com and parkournews.com that he couldn't achieve with Take Flight's website? And this still doesn't explain why he cybersquatted on domains with parkourists' names.

In 2014, Kie Willis made a grave and frankly worded exposé video highlighting all of the above. Shortly after, Timothy Shieff released his own with similar sentiments. The videos from these influential figures sparked a storm of controversy (pun intended), leading to a community-wide witch hunt and boycott. Dunlap replied to the accusations of domain name hoarding, saying, "I bought all the names relating to parkour guys to keep them safe." In a video response to Kie Willis's exposé, Dunlap says:

> "How can a nobody get in with someone like Daniel Ilabaca? How can he create a relationship? The only thing I can think of is to have something that they want and then to say, "*Look, I'm giving this to you because I respect you and admire you.*" If someone did that for me, I'd say, "*Whoa, this is a cool guy. What company does he have?*" And that was the vision. That's how we get in. That's how a nobody who starts a company that nobody cares about gets in with the coolest guys in the parkour world. And guess what? It backfired. A few of those guys got mad, got some lawyers involved who then accused me and threatened me."

A Facebook page named *Investigate Dunlap* was created as part of this merry old witch-hunt. Scott Bass posted, saying, "I also heard that there was this new parkour mag, *Vertical Floor*. [It] turns out that they were originally going to be called *Traceur Magazine*. They interviewed Adam Dunlap and told him about the magazine... and guess who immediately bought www.traceurmagazine.com? And then he wanted to charge them $10k to get it."

Dunlap arrogantly replied in the comments, "I have plans for that domain. I bought it, and I have rights to it *smiley emoji* Why do you hate on every little thing I do?"

Maybe because it's painstakingly obvious that you're a conniving, stinking wretch, Adam! And no one else was even close to pulling this sort of shit! That's maybe why! With this example, it stands to reason that Dunlap's intention in buying parkourist's domain names was not to keep them safe or to establish a professional relationship, but to profit from them. Or at least, the sites will redirect to his clothing store. Despite Dunlap's claims in numerous comments, videos, and interviews, this form of cybersquatting is illegal. Beyond the legalities, even if the parkourists had no intention of taking the domain names for themselves, it's just plain annoying to have a slime ball profit from their name.

After the controversy died down, Kie Willis received an email from Dunlap proposing that they stage some fake online beef off the back of the last controversy with the goal of publicity and mutual business gain. This was undoubtedly an attempt to re-stoke the flames to increase traffic to the Take Flight website. However, the email was read, shared around, laughed at by many, and never replied to. It's clear that for Dunlap, any publicity is good publicity. Dunlap's petty attempts to stir the pot were best left ignored, as with his entire brand. This is why I was hesitant in 2024 when Maximus Ward reached out to interview me for a video he was making on Adam Dunlap and why people don't like him. What's hilarious is that Dunlap reached out to Ward to make the video on him. The video was confounding. He seemed completely oblivious to why so many took issue with his business practices. The shameless attempts to gain publicity, for better or worse, to increase website traffic, remain unrivalled in the history of the parkour industry. I think since then, it's only been the noobs, led by Dunlap's supreme search engine optimisation, who've kept Take Flight afloat.

He runs parkour.com, which was originally owned by Sébastien Foucan. Foucan bought it in 2005 during the dot-com bubble because of his knowledge of intellectual property as an artist. He then gave it to David Belle. Years later, after Dunlap wedged himself into David's life as his "manager" by gatecrashing the funeral

of his old manager, he assumed control of the website, which now unsurprisingly serves purely as a noob funnel to Take Flight's online store. For the community, Take Flight's reputation has been in tatters for well over a decade and is beyond resuscitating, but for the naive beginner or their parents, Take Flight can appear to be the official clothing of parkour.

Another honourable mention is when, in 2013, a handful of prominent parkourists became involved with an energy drink called *Verve* from a company named *Vemma*. And by "got involved", I mean swindled by perhaps the most blatant pyramid scheme you can imagine. Even parkourists of the calibre of Christian Harmat and Oleg Vorslav were duped by their friends and then, of course, attempted to deceive their other friends by recruiting them into the scheme. Vemma briefly spread like wildfire in the community, and many boneheads were extorted. Athletic calibre apparently doesn't equal intellectual calibre. The company was eventually shut down by the Federal Trade Commission in 2015.

These brazen outliers set the bar high in a community already hypersensitive to anything surrounding commercialisation and commodification. They served well to whittle down what our community is or is not prepared to tolerate for parkourists and businesses. Our acceptance of commercialisation has come a long way since then. Maybe because many of the anticapitalist idealists grew up and realised they couldn't live off mum and dad forever, and they found themselves in a meaningless job at the bottom rung of the capitalist system and realised that making money from parkour isn't all that bad. Or they realised they were not "strong" enough to be "useful" enough not to need money to live. No amount of jumps would make them Henry David Thoreau.

Nowadays, money talk seems inescapable. Industry has seamlessly become interwoven with parkour and is a somewhat dominating theme of conversation. Jimmy The Giant had numerous videos with money in parkour as their central theme. Most of Shaun Wood's *All Good* podcasts are about making it big as a pro freerunner and entrepreneur. Giles Campbell Longley went through a short-lived

phase of making YouTube videos about fiscal responsibility and entrepreneurship. Jacob Cormier even ran a website simply titled *Parkour Entrepreneur*, which featured many articles on succeeding in our industry. Jimmy Davidson and Christopher Hollingsworth apparently attended one Tony Robbins course and now charge for business consultations through their company, Motion Mentors. They also founded the Parkour Industry Convention—a three-day event of business lectures, all for the affordable price of $497…

Purists now give a tacit thumbs-up for pursuing a career in parkour and commodifying it often to the point of cringe. However, business is not exactly booming. The founders, Urban Freeflow and Storm Freerun, demonstrated that it was possible to earn money from parkour. With their example, many of us made it our dream to turn our passion into our profession.

Storror are now that example. I am beyond grateful to be among the fortunate handful who can say that "Parkour is my job." It only took over ten years to convince my dad that it was possible to earn a living wage by jumping on walls, even though I doubted it myself countless times. It is certainly possible, but extremely hard to reach and maintain. I wishfully put all my eggs in one basket for a long time. I hoped that one day, the trickle of commercial and performance work would become frequent enough for my brother Sacha and me not to bunk trains and buses, steal food, and endure cold English winters without heating or hot water at home. Professional work can be wildly sporadic and infrequent. I quit my job at Tesco in 2014 due to a hope-inducing influx of work, only to receive dribs and drabs over the following years. As our mother passed away the year prior, we had no financial safety net to pay the mortgage and bills for our family home. The unopened debt collectors' letters kept piling up on our doormat, each with progressively bolder red capital letters on the envelopes. We desperately clung to the hope that things would eventually work out, and although well below the poverty line, we still had some of the funnest years of our lives. The enduring passion of our friend group saw us through long enough to pull us over the hump to financial security. However, the route that got us there is far from an easily replicable formula. Despite much hard work and some good ideas, I

still consider it a happy cosmic accident that a parkour YouTube channel and clothing company can support a group of seven and a meagre handful of employees. However, we are still at the mercy of time, and, with no other qualifications, the eggs are all still firmly seated in the same basket.

Many of us are genuinely talented parkourists striving to build our online presence and become influencers or YouTubers, aiming to earn a living wage so we can continue investing all our energy in training. There are countless parkour clothing brands creating core cultural fashion that has transcended the old formula of colourful Gildan T-shirts with a logo printed on them, and garish, over-baggy track pants. There are hundreds of gyms, academies, workshop events and coaches all passing on parkour to those willing to learn. On the surface, a lot is happening; however, many of our professionals still face financial insecurity. Parkour has always had a thriving worldwide community, to the point that you can travel to any city and likely find a community training there; yet parkour still seems only at the cusp of mainstream acceptance. There is undoubtedly public interest in parkour, but commercial interest can seem somewhat limited. But wait! There is a hero in our midst…

Corporate Giants vs Our Grassroots

In 2019, a New Yorker named Miguel Southee Jr came up with the idea to print and sell bootleg Nike PK T-shirts. It was a cunning plan to get Nike to notice parkour. He claimed he's "doing this for us." Miguel aimed to receive a cease-and-desist letter from Nike to start a conversation and get his foot in the door with the corporate bigwigs. The Nike PK Instagram bio reads, "Bootlegs until they notice us." Oh boy, one can dream, right? If a big corporation like Nike were to notice us, maybe we'd have a way to pump more money into parkour's economy and help more talented athletes make a living from it as they deserve. They could do with parkour as they did with skateboarding, and create a plethora of shoe models. It definitely won't only end in a lawsuit, will it?

Except... corporations like Nike already know about parkour. And you can bet that the CEOs couldn't care less about a kid in Brooklyn screen printing their logo on some Gildan blanks in his bedroom and selling them to his mates.

As you may remember, Nike produced a series of commercials featuring David Belle, Sébastien Foucan, and others from Les Traceurs back in 2001. Ben Jenkin starred in a high-budget Nike commercial in 2012. For some reason, in 2009, Nike made a peculiar advert featuring an animated robot wearing a hoodie and doing parkour over rooftops. Nike certainly knows we exist. Miguel claims the inspiration for selling bootleg Nike tees came from seeing so many parkourists training in Nike SB shoes and clothing. He thought, "Why shouldn't there be a Nike PK?"

If the goal was for a giant corporation to develop a parkour-specific shoe line, he should have paid attention to other massive brands that have tried this before. In 2004, Adidas developed a shoe called *A3 Hyper Ride* with parkour in mind and involved Urban Freeflow in its marketing campaign. In 2007, K-Swiss released the first shoe specially designed for parkour, *Ariake*. These were potentially the ugliest shoes you could imagine and were awful for parkour. I'm unsure who helped develop them, but Sébastien Foucan jumped on some big letters in a studio for the official commercial. Despite being abysmal, they released a second, equally ghastly version in 2011. Urban Freeflow collaborated with Adidas again for two years to develop a shoe called *Traceur,* with two versions released in 2007 and 2008. Again, in 2008, the climbing shoe company Five Ten released an ugly abomination of a shoe aimed at the parkour community. Once again, I have no idea whether they collaborated with anyone from the community to design them, but they reached out to Sacha and me, sending us a pair each. As expected from a climbing shoe brand, the soles were unbelievably grippy on walls, but the rubber was so soft that they wore down after a month of training. They were also as slippery as soapy ice on bars.

Although I admire these brands for taking a risk on a newly emerging sport and subculture, none of these early shoes stuck around for long. If anything, in this period, most of the parkour community were more infatuated with the Kalenji Success running

shoes they could pick up from the nearest Decathlon store for £9.95. This trend was supposedly initiated in 2007 by a Les Traceurs member, Thomas Couetdic. He first picked up a pair in Tours, France, because they were cheaper than the Nike Pegasus that were all the rage at the time. He tried to convince his French friends how good they were, but they were unfazed. Their popularity only gained steam when parkourists in London saw him training in them. I remember the era when you were uncool and weird if you weren't wearing these dirt-cheap hobo-esque running shoes. They weren't exactly spectacular, either. If anything, it was just a testament to how quickly we got through shoes and how broke we all were as grungy teenagers living off paper rounds and pocket money from our parents. It was also a testament to the cultural power of the in-group. People from other countries, without Decathlon, would stock up on Kalenjis whenever they visited London.

In 2009, when the dreaded day came that they were discontinued, the news spread like wildfire. In a frenzy, parkourists ravaged their local Decathlon as if it were the end of days. A video called *Bumbaflex* shows Neil Hutson and Phil Doyle with a shopping basket filled to the brim with ten pairs of Kalenjis. Some drove far and wide, trying their luck at different Decathlons. Those quick enough to have stocked up a surplus could sell a pair for 5-10 times the original price to frantic parkourists who couldn't imagine themselves training in any other shoe, even years later. I bought a pair from Tim Shieff for double the price, and they were a size too small. Among those with a surplus were the Danish twins, Jim and Joe Hougaard. They were on the obsessive side when it came to preserving their Kalenjis. They would avoid doing arm jumps or anything that would scuff the soles. When training in Munich once in 2013, I saw Joe looking genuinely pissed off after he undershot a running precision, resulting in a crane. They would be cautious walking around with them, lifting their legs carefully with every step to avoid dragging their feet and accumulating unnecessary wear and tear from minor scrapes. They would remove their Kalenjis and use different shoes to walk between spots. They are genuinely a collector's item now. If there were ever to be a parkour museum, they would be a primary exhibit, safely guarded by laser sensors inside an

airtight, tempered-glass cabinet. It was undoubtedly the most significant shoe trend in parkour to date. Maybe the closest has been K-Swiss Si-18 or Reebok Classics.

Decathlon later collaborated with Parkour Generations to develop a remake of the original Kalenji Success called *Visions*, which was released in January 2012. They were an even uglier, brick-like monstrosity, somehow even thicker and far worse than the original. And they were far more expensive, which defeated the point. The community was displeased. Needless to say, the Danish Hougaard twins were beyond displeased. A video titled *"Aarhus Parkour Vision Scene"* is a hard-hitting, emotional cinematic piece that shows Jim and Joe expressing their distaste by destroying their shoes with a large pickaxe. In a Marrero Gang video, Jimmy The Giant also satirically reviewed the shoes by holding an actual brick instead of the shoe while talking.

Another extraordinary shoe that I only recently discovered is Hugo Boss's *Parkour* trainers. And yes, trainers, plural. They released countless shoes in a wide variety of designs and colourways, all bearing the name "parkour". All of them are strangely priced between £100 and £200. It's honestly mind-boggling that these exist. In this case, it's abundantly clear they didn't collaborate with anyone from the parkour community to develop them. And whoever was in charge of their market research needs to be sacked because there was evidently no market research whatsoever. It was as if they created a bunch of ugly trainers and slapped *parkour* on them to make them seem new, cool, and hip. If you search "Hugo Boss parkour trainers" on YouTube, you'll fail to find anyone training in them. Instead, you'll find some clueless Zappos dorks talking about the shoes in a studio.

We can be sure that Nike and other major brands are keeping a watchful eye on parkour. They continue to pay our professionals for their ad campaigns. In 2024 alone, Nike hired Joe Rizzo, Laine Cammarata, Wenxin Yang, Toby Segar and me. Josh Burnett-Blake, Jennifer Wilson, Isabel Salazar, Luke Horner and Ed Scott were brought on for a high-budget Adidas Y3 campaign. The North Face hired Didi Alaoui, Brooks Running hired Kareen Small, Givenchy

hired Robbie Griffith, Asos hired Toby Segar, and again in 2025, Under Armour hired seven parkourists from New York, and Apple collaborated with Drew Taylor, Benj Cave, Josh Burnett-Blake and Toby Segar to promote their stupid £4,000 virtual reality headset. Hazal has sponsorships with Reebok and Red Bull; Joe Scandrett with Boohoo Man; Brodie Pawson with Mido Watches; and Noa Diorgina Man with Red Bull, Breitling, Techno Gym, Adidas, Prep The Food, My Protein, and just about everything else.

These examples show clear interest; however, there is a significant difference between investing in associating their brand with the sport through commercial campaigns and investing in our market to create products, as Nike and Adidas have done with skateboarding. This is what Miguel Southee Jr seems to be going for with his Nike PK bootleg campaign. However, at this stage, they likely assume that investing in our sport in this way will yield little return. As mentioned, brands have tried before. And judging by how quickly they vanished, the investment can't have been worthwhile. However, this was during a period where our young and skint community latched onto the £9.95 Kalenji trainers—the period when we couldn't be caught dead without anything more lavish than £2.50 Primark joggers.

They may have more success nowadays, as it seems our community has become more willing to part with its cash. Since 2012, when the Swiss parkour brand Etre Fort started selling boutique baggy joggers (I know, it seems like an oxymoron) and marketed them extremely well by collaborating with the right people (namely, Galizian Urban Project), the tides seemed to turn, and we suddenly became voracious consumers. Team Farang played a significant role as well, particularly in transforming the community's fashion tastes from what bordered on homeless chic to a more contemporary style. This doesn't mean it was better—not by a long shot. I cringe more looking back at videos of myself in 2015 wearing long-fit tees and Farang's leggings-bottomed, drop-crotched harem pants, far more than when comparing to the cheap, faded olive green, hole-covered, blood-stained, XXL Primark pants days. But at the time, long-fit T-shirts seemed cool and different, and we all just wanted to look like the fashionista freerunning prince Jason Paul.

Dozens of our brands had released clothing before, but instead of printing on Gildan blanks, brands like Farang, Skochypstiks, and Etre Fort produced meticulously designed cut-and-sew pieces and charged more than any other parkour brand had before. Now it seems the norm for our community to splurge on expensive new releases from the likes of Gefam, Scruffy, Kipa, Storror, Moondi and Capstone. The same goes for spending on other upmarket streetwear brands, so we can all be dripped out and LARP as skaters without the board. I don't doubt that if Nike or Adidas invested in our market now, it'd be far more profitable, as we'd likely lap up whatever shoes and clothing they produce, like good little consumers.

Please don't misunderstand me; I respect Miguel Southee Jr's intentions with the Nike PK bootleg ploy and believe they were sincere and admirable. Still, I'm unsure what benefits he expected from Nike producing parkour shoes. Granted, it'll generate a few odd jobs for some in design consultancy and marketing. However, considering Nike can develop a shoe in bulk batches for cheap in Chinese sweat shops with anti-suicide nets below the windows, distribute them in malls, high street shops and online retailers worldwide, and then sell them for £30-60 a pop, it massively undermines the numerous grassroots parkour brands that have toiled away hard for years to develop their own shoes.

Skateboarding was doing exceptionally well when Nike came along. Their industry was independently growing exponentially. Much of the skateboarding community still flipped their lid when Nike came to muscle in on their industry. Upon seeing its massive boom in popularity, Nike dug in its talons and tried to assert dominance in this burgeoning and lucrative industry. Nike failed a few times. In the early 00s, they produced an ugly line of shoes, invested heavily in marketing and brought on world-famous pros like Bam Margera. And the happily outcast counter-culture entirely rejected Nike's efforts to encroach on their independent industry. Nike massively misunderstood the skateboarding world. Their soulless corporate image was rejected by skaters everywhere.

Nike had to jump through many costly hoops to gain their approval, such as selling Nike SB shoes exclusively from skate shops

and not mass-producing them. Their eventual success and acceptance were primarily due to the hiring of skateboarding OG Sandy Bodecker, who spearheaded this grassroots replication operation. He also informed them that Nike had already played an instrumental role in skateboarding history, as skaters wore Nike basketball shoes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Like us, they wore other shoes because they were cheaper than skate shoes and often more comfortable and durable. Durability is just as crucial to skateboarders as it is to us, because the grip tape lacerates the area around the little toe. And if they knee-slide in bowls, they strip the laces and the front of the shoe. Skaters might even destroy shoes faster than we do. Of course, cheaper shoes make more sense for skater dirtbags on a budget. Bodecker championed simply revamping the 1985 basketball shoe, the Nike Dunks. But now, likely due to the massive rise in skateboarding's popularity, Nike SB Dunks are too expensive for the average skater, with the cheapest being around £100. Not only that, but limited editions become a collector's item, often auctioned off and sold for thousands. After a quick Google search, the most expensive pair I found was the *Paris Dunk Low* on StockX. They're on sale for the modest price of £107,000...

Stepping on our Achilles Heel

My question is, why would we want Nike to swoop in and dominate our already tiny and struggling grassroots industry? Or any multinational corporate giant, for that matter. I find it funny that when Nike tried to inject themselves into the skateboarding industry in the early 00s, skaters quickly told them to fuck off. When, on the other hand, many parkourists are overly keen to poke their butts up to them, saying, "Please, sir, please! Please fuck us! Fuck us hard! Take us for all we've got!" We are the *pick me girls* of the sporting world.

Shoes are practically the only specialised equipment our grassroots brands have any potential to develop. It's great that we don't need any equipment for what we do, as it makes parkour cheap and accessible, but it's undoubtedly our Achilles heel as an industry.

Far more money would circulate through the parkour economy if we had equipment such as decks, trucks, wheels, and bearings to manufacture and sell. This is a huge part of what made skateboarding robust, independent, and able to resist corporations seeping into their market for so long. Other lifestyle sports brands can sponsor athletes with actual money rather than T-shirts. And a large part of that is no doubt due to selling specialised equipment. Then there's also the 'pro model' aspect.

Besides shoes, the best ideas for additional equipment we can muster are chalk, chalk bags, prep ropes, microfibre towels, and brushes. These are all a stretch, considering that one can obtain these items unbranded practically anywhere and at a fraction of the price. Many of our brands seem to be kept afloat by the charity and support of our community. We don't *need* our favourite brand's microfibre towel the way skaters *need* wheels, decks, bearings and trucks, yet we pay for it because we respect the brand and want to support its future cultural contributions. An industry that is predominantly charity-based doesn't seem sustainable. Anyone poor, more frugal, or anti-consumerist can train for twenty years without purchasing a single parkour product. Parkour clothing is a *want*, not a *need*. Perfecting the specialised shoe may be a good option, but still, it would take some serious grifting to convince parkourists that they need them.

Our grassroots brands that develop parkour shoes invest a great deal into creating something decent for our sport. It's an exhausting and heavily expensive learning curve, and there always tend to be unforeseen problems around every corner. There are many frustrating teething problems and miscommunications with the factories on every level of the sample phase. As you may have noticed, most grassroots parkour shoes rarely perform as well as high-street brands. You may also have noticed that practically every parkour shoe uses a sole mould from a pre-existing shoe. That's because developing a custom rubber sole mould from scratch costs more than twice as much, often close to a £10,000 difference. Tempest's first shoes used the popular K-Swiss Si-18's sole. WFPF (Know Obstacles), with their first shoe in 2011, nabbed the iconic sole from the Kalenji Success. Team Farang used the sole from Adidas Element Refresh. 3Run's 360 Volts used an unidentifiable, nondescript

running shoe sole, probably from the soles of your grandpa's Asics power walking sneakers. (When writing this, these hideous creations are up on 3Run's online store for £7.99! It's a bargain, if you ask me. It's not often you get cheap fire kindling with an almost indiscernible cityscape stitched haphazardly into the side. Buy whilst stocks last!)

For our first Storror Tens, we used a sole mould from a miscellaneous Le Coq Sportif trainer, which no one noticed because only middle-aged divorced dads and nursing home workers wear Le Coq Sportif. On our second run of the Tens in 2020, the factory messed up and sent us two thousand pairs with the Le Coq Sportif cockerel logo on the sole of every pair! My stomach dropped when I found out. Needless to say, we risked being sued by Le Coq Sportif. And it would also be a weird surprise for any customer who bought them. We had a serious discussion about whether to release them or take the monumental financial L on the chin and bin them all. We chose the former. The upside was that when wearing the shoes, I could ask people if they wanted to see my coq…

Specialised shoes are an exceedingly tricky part of our industry to develop because they directly compete with non-parkour shoes. It's not like climbing, weightlifting, sprinting and distance running shoes, where you can feel a night and day difference in performance with regular sneakers. At this stage, the difference between a good parkour shoe and a good non-parkour shoe is slim and hard to determine. But buying a non-parkour shoe is usually way less risky and far cheaper. The community also seems increasingly comfortable in shoes that are less ideal for parkour. Thin, flat skate shoes have become more common as parkourists' inclinations for style and fashion grow in importance. If a large portion of the community no longer requires the best shoes for the job, our grassroots brands are less likely to sell their shoes beyond incentives tied to charity and support.

Financial Independence vs Corporate Acquisitions

As we're already fighting an uphill battle with what may be our only saving grace in our industry, why would we want brands like Nike to muscle in and usurp it? Maybe we were lucky that Adidas and K-Swiss

jumped ship after realising that we were all cheapskates and that parkour as a market was a barren wasteland. Big corporations have always known we exist. I'm not saying that Nike PK is a terrible idea; it's maybe just a little naive. It could likely work in many ways, as it eventually did with Nike SB and Adidas Skateboarding, although many skaters still rather buy from core brands. However, we're far from being in a position to make the kind of demands that the skateboarding community did. If anything, we must stay wary of big corporations' level of involvement, their impact on our public image, and the growth and sustainability of our grassroots businesses.

We should be grateful that corporations are interested in parkour and put bread on our professionals' tables through ad campaigns and sponsorship deals. But some are perhaps best kept at arm's length. Hopefully, one day, our fledgling economy will be large enough so that we don't have to rely on outside sponsorships and funding. The grassroots brands and organisations within our community can then fund our athletes, events, and competitions. We will have the power to say no to energy drink sponsorships and feed ourselves and our culture from within our weird bubble. Imagine we get to a stage where someone like Bang Energy approaches Ed Scott with a contract, and he can reply, "Nah, I'm cushty cheers. Parkour Collective is paying me plenty, and I'd rather represent them than your tacky brand."

Many are trying to make a living from parkour just to cover the costs of training, progressing, travelling to events and competitions, and growing the sport. An ideal target is to have pro parkourists funded by parkourists. But until that happens, we need all the help we can get, so long as we're cautious not to step on our Achilles heel. So, as long as our professionals have bills to pay, you'll just have to put up with seeing Bang Energy, Mido Watches, Huel, Red Bull, Boohoo Man, Nocco, My Protein, Barebells and all the other crap you see unimaginatively product-placed on Instagram and YouTube. Although we can still aim to do a more tasteful job than Luke Stones...

Sadly, parkour has likely already seen its heyday. The boom in opportunities has long since passed, with EZ, Urban Freeflow, and

early Storm Freerun. We're no longer the new and exciting sport on the block; therefore, it is not such a spectacular novelty that brands and corporations will pay to leverage interest and sell their products as frequently as before. Or maybe these things come in waves. Perhaps we're just in a dip right now, and it's swelling up for another big wave. Maybe the ever-progressing Storror Parkour Pro game will set us up for another wave or catapult us as Tony Hawk's Pro Skater did for skateboarding. Perhaps our documentary, *We Are Storror*, will spark another boom, just as *Free Solo* did for climbing. Maybe parkour will be represented well in the Olympics instead of being a train wreck featuring parkour gymnasts squirming around on the floor between predictable high bar tricks...

One can be optimistic, but who knows? Maybe those pioneering street sports video games have served their purpose by now; that gap in pop culture has now been filled. No one knows when our next wave will come or what will cause it.

But let's say that we did reach this point. Imagine parkour becomes so popular and profitable that our industry and core-culture grassroots brands appear to be a reasonable investment for other companies or investment firms. Big companies don't necessarily need to break into a market from the ground up, as Nike SB and Adidas Skateboarding have. They can simply buy out existing companies and inject themselves into a market. Other action sports have dealt with this over the years, and it often comes with unforeseen consequences.

Many action sports companies thrived early on by championing an identity of authenticity and countercultural defiance that reflected their culture. Some started in garages, passionately tinkering away to develop the ideal equipment for their sports. Their owners lived and breathed their sports and were deeply embedded in their cultures. They fostered the growth of their sports through events, competitions, sponsorships, and video parts. Snowboarding companies fought for snowboarders' rights to the slopes and helped to lift bans from ski resorts. Powell-Peralta and Santa Cruz both launched the *Skateboarding Is Not A Crime* movement in response to anti-skate legislation, and ordinances began to arise. As their sports grew, other soulless corporate entities, who knew nothing about the

sports, smelt green and began making offers that many independent business owners couldn't refuse.

World Industries, founded by Steve Rocco and Rodney Mullen, was once the world's largest independent skateboard company. It was valued at $29 million when Kubic Marketing acquired it in 1998. In 2002, Kubic was bought by Globe International. In 2007, Globe International Limited sold World Industries to i.e. Distribution. In 2014, World Industries was acquired by GVS America, a wholly owned subsidiary of INA Sports and FGL Sports. As if that wasn't enough, they changed hands again in 2024 and are now under the ownership of SeaJack. Constant changes in ownership have made the company feel hollow and soulless to the community.

DC Shoes were a goliath in skateboarding in the late 90s and at their roaring peak in the early 00s. In their early days, consumers felt they were buying an association with a countercultural lifestyle, rather than simply a product. They expanded into BMX, ski and snowboarding, and had their iconic logo plastered everywhere you could find action sports. DC began leaning into lifestyle products, expanding into fashion and casual wear, and slowly veering away from its raw, rugged skateboarding roots. The brand's core skate audience began to notice and spend their money elsewhere. This vastly accelerated when the surf brand Quiksilver swallowed DC in 2004 for $87 million. Quiksilver was also in a downturn, as it, along with Billabong, Volcom, and other surf brands, was controlled by Liberated Brands under a single corporate structure called Authentic Brands Group. These brands, once trusted as pillars of their communities and for their high-quality specialised products, were now sold in malls worldwide and producing generic, mass-produced gear and clothing of far worse quality. Video parts, events and competitions dwindled. Surfers' wetsuits began tearing in less than half the usual time, and it became clear that whatever these culture-driven companies originally stood for had eroded and been sacrificed to cut costs, maximise profits, and appeal to a broader and more lucrative mall-shopper demographic. Hundreds of Quiksilver, Billabong, and Volcom stores closed down in 2015. Their parent company, Liberated Brands, filed for bankruptcy in February 2025, resulting in 1,400 employee layoffs and the closure of all 120

Quiksilver, Roxy, Billabong, RVCA, DC Shoes, Element and Volcom stores across the US and Canada. The brands aren't entirely dead yet, but the parent company's bankruptcy has heavily impacted them.

Of course, these things are complex; the economy is volatile, tastes and trends change, and it's becoming increasingly more difficult for brick-and-mortar stores to compete with the fast-fashion online retail powerhouses. But spitting in the face of the culture whose image they feed on can't have helped.

Nidecker is a company that owns several snowboarding brands, to the point where it controls the market. This results in product homogeneity across brands and creates an illusion of choice for customers. Nidecker are killing creativity and unique variation between different brands' boards and products.

VF Corporation bought Vans for $398 million in 2004. VF Corp is a titanic clothing conglomerate, owning brands such as Supreme, The North Face, Timberland, Dickies, Eastpak, JanSport, Napapijri, Nautica, Lee, Wrangler, and more. Of course, we can't say that corporate takeovers will inevitably lead all brands to fail or be stripped of their former culture-centred identity. Some acquisitions involve only partial ownership, in which the original owner retains some control, and profits are typically distributed in proportion to the ownership stake. With wholly owned subsidiaries, the parent company has complete control over profits and can decide how to use them, including investing in other subsidiaries with more favourable prospects. Previous owners can still be involved, but with a change in ownership, the new shareholders can select a new board of directors, who can then replace the CEO and other executives.

This may all seem incredibly boring, but it's all to say that if decisions concerning the sport are made by those who only specialise in corporate balance sheets, you can guarantee this will be transparent to the sports' communities. They will lose cultural influence and loyal support from those who, before, didn't just rep the brand as a trend, but as a statement. When a brand's image, products and community-centred actions are transformed under parent companies whose only goal is maximising profits, that statement holds less weight.

It entirely depends on who is appointed to oversee what. Sandy Bodecker's success in earning the faith of the skateboarding community through his grassroots replication operation for Nike SB is a good example. The North Face still seems devoutly focused on climbing and various adventure sports, while also marketing sleeveless puffer jackets to Silicon Valley tech emperors and teenage wannabe-roadmen in the UK who collide with cars when wheelie-ing on their bikes. Vans, with its wavering focus on skateboarding, still retains support from some skaters, despite shifting to being a mainstream lifestyle brand, marketed to out-of-touch millennials and *cool* mums. However, despite Supreme's corporate acquisitions, they have maintained a steady decline in integrity in the skateboarding world since the mid-2010s, driven by its increasingly hyper-consumerist gimmicks. In 2020, VF Corporation bought Supreme from The Carlyle Group for $2.1 billion, only for the obnoxious Hypebeast era to come to an abrupt close. VF Corporation sold Supreme to EssilorLuxottica for $1.5 billion in 2024. Its brand value will likely continue to drop without the patronage of the skateboarding community, or those stupid enough to spend unholy amounts of money on bricks, kayaks, gardening gloves, incense stick holders, bolt cutters, crowbars, fire extinguishers, dog bowls, switchblade combs and harmonicas with their iconic box logo that was shamelessly ripped off from the artist, Barbara Kruger. Ironically, Supreme's logo was stolen from her 1980s anti-capitalist work.

All this is to say, there is perhaps a happy middle ground between where parkour is now and where other action sports' industries are currently. So-called core skaters have always been hypersensitive to sell-outs. They seem far more irritable than the parkour purist anti-capitalists of old. Even Thrasher Magazine has slipped up and come under fire over the years, despite keeping an otherwise immaculate track record for remaining a bastion of skateboarding's rebellious heart. Core skaters have scorned anything that creates an accessible and corporate feel. They boycott Zumiez stores in the mall and view all who rock skate brands without skating with utter contempt. And if you are making the plunge to start skateboarding and you hold your board in an uncool way, you're labelled with the pejorative, "mall-

grabber". As soon as they see too many paparazzi photos of A-list celebrities wearing a skate brand, they no longer want to associate with that brand.

In contrast, without the extensive history of corporations encroaching on our sport's industry and identity, we are more open to developments that may create financial pathways for professionals. And I'm sure we'd all be stoked to see a paparazzi photo of Rihanna donning a Capstone hoodie while she's innocently trying to order an iced latte at a Dunkin' Donuts. It would signify growth and broader acceptance of our niche culture. It might indicate that we've reached a point where our culture has moved beyond the negative association with the "The Office" meme. Most of us are incredibly welcoming to beginners and won't shame them for not knowing about our many cultural faux pas. Most of us are parkour advocates and want more people to get involved.

Suppose parkour's popularity were to grow exponentially. In that case, the happy middle ground for our industry might be reached when our professionals have a stable income that covers their basic needs and allows them to continue training and engaging with the sport in a meaningful way. Desiring much more, we risk falling prey to greed, which could lead us into the same traps as the action sports that came before us. If we see another boom, Storror is likely to be the first target in the crosshairs of these predatory investment firms. We may have some hard decisions to make ahead of us.

Sell Outs

Nevertheless, it's not all bad. Despite an early pushback from purists, Red Bull has generally been an ally to parkour culture. (Barring some gender inequality issues, which I'll address later.) They've been involved in parkour since 2007. Despite Red Bull's questionable product being an overly sweet carbonated concoction of taurine, caffeine, sucrose, and glucose, they have assembled an international athlete team comprising a handful of the sport's iconic figures, thereby paying their salaries and using their seemingly bottomless

pockets to fund and produce high-production video content for their platforms.

They have been hosting the Art of Motion competitions since 2007, where parkourists from around the world compete for prize money. So, here we have two reasons why purists had a problem with Red Bull's involvement in parkour. The first is that Red Bull is not good for your health, and a handful of sanctimonious puritanical purists have, for some reason, decided that if you do parkour, one must be an ascetic monk who must abstain from polluting one's body with such sacrilegious and putrid filth. Andy Day wrote in a blog post:

> Sponsorship and commercialisation are inevitable. The authenticity of parkour – the pure, alternative, liberating power of our subculture – is often damaged when money becomes involved. This is unavoidable: in our neoliberal world, commercialisation is par for the course. However, the least that communities and individuals can do is try to choose companies that produce something beneficial towards parkour, health, or being physical.
>
> If you associate yourself with an energy drink or a casino, all your inspirational words of wisdom regarding health, training, diet and philosophy are meaningless. It's not just that you sold out; you sold out to a product that you know undermines the healthy body/healthy mind mentality of a traceur."

Says the man seen in a shot in *'The Way' UF France trip (part 3)*, lighting a cigarette. Jokes aside, I agree with Andy to some extent. However, parkourists are not a homogeneous group beholden to the same ideas surrounding diet and nutrition.

When I was 16, I was against Red Bull as a brand and its involvement in parkour because of its purported unhealthiness, while at the same time, my go-to lunch on a day of training consisted of custard cream biscuits, flame-grilled flavoured McCoys crisps and two pints of milk! (While on the subject, once, in the hour our bus took us from Brighton to Eastbourne, Sacha and I gobbled an entire 24-pack

multipack of meat-flavoured crisps before a full 10-hour training day. A day of vigorous physical activity fuelled solely by trans fats!)

There also remains the idea that any association with alcohol or weed is utterly deplorable, as if all those practising parkour should renounce all vices of the lowly ordinary people. However, the unavoidable fact remains that we ARE ordinary people. The primary difference is that we jump on walls. There isn't a code of ethics that ties us all together as subscribers of some ascetic, anti-hedonistic, abstinent cult of wellness. It's funny how there's an online uproar when people are drinking beer and smoking weed in a parkour-related hip-hop music video in Australia. (Check out the song: Sole Destroyers by Barnzy. And yes, they came up with the name *Sole Destroyers* before The Motus Projects.) Or when a Whiskey brand sponsors an after-party for a parkour event in the US.

On the flip side, I think it's also lame when people consistently showcase alcohol and weed in their videos as if it adds a level of coolness. As if by making gratuitous alcohol and weed consumption part of their brand, they will be seen as edgy and rambunctious party animals like the cooler urban subcultures. It must also be said that Lawrence Pablo making Stella Artois a part of his online identity, although perhaps partly ironic, is still cringe. Sorry, Pabz.

Yes, you're not any cooler if you drink or smoke, and yes, alcohol and smoking are detrimental to health, recovery and performance, especially when used in excess. This comes as no surprise to anyone. However, for members of the parkour community to argue with and question other adults' decisions about their choices of vices is pathetic. It is also rich to judge someone for accepting sponsorships and working with brands not associated with wellness. Especially when it comes to the fields of health and nutrition, where there are so many diametrically opposing views surrounding sugar, meat, carbs, fibre, fruit, vegetables, artificial sweeteners, caffeine, processed foods, seed oils, saturated fat, cholesterol, salt, soy, creatine, fluoride, preservatives, food dyes, glyphosate, GMOs, organics, "chemicals" you can't pronounce, dairy, raw milk, and gluten. In fact, if you listened to every self-professed health and wellness influencer online, you would have nothing left to eat. And you definitely wouldn't be accepting any sponsorships.

Perhaps a more appropriate lens for vetting brands is their human rights and sustainability ethics. We should be more wary of affiliating with companies that exploit workers, pollute excessively or support fascistic regimes to maximise profits. For some, the idea of discerningly picking sponsorships doesn't make sense as an option. It's far from a smorgasbord where we can pick and choose companies based on our preferences. In our barren wasteland of an industry, many cannot afford to pass on rare opportunities when they arise. The threshold of when someone else becomes a sell-out will depend on who you're talking to. The threshold for when YOU become a sell-out is as soon as you give up your personal principles and ethics for the bag. We will dip in and out of the industry topic for the remainder of the book.

Chapter 14 - Competition

The second reason people were against Red Bull's involvement early on – and likely the more prominent factor – was that competition in parkour was viewed as the antichrist. David Belle and others had said in a couple of interviews that parkour was not about competition. Sure enough, this was solidified as an unamendable dogma of holy scripture in the purist handbook, despite Belle being depicted several times as pathologically competitive. It's been said that he used to break certain jumps alone, only to return later with others and pretend to flash them easily to seem superior. David is someone who appears competitive to the core, with a whole lot to prove. Beyond this, in 2017, he served as a poster boy for the Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG) as it sought to incorporate parkour as a new competitive gymnastics discipline into the Olympic programme.

However, it wasn't only David who raised our community's guard against competing. Sébastien Foucan said, "No group, no chief, no competition; only a way." Châu Belle Dinh said, "It's not a sport, it's a way of life." Williams Belle simply said, "There is no point competing." These thoroughly thought-out and well-articulated arguments from the founders were apparently enough for early parkourists. The gods had spoken, and it was so. To this day, some still maintain that parkour should remain a competition-free discipline. As mentioned in Chapter 1, some of these individuals hold positions of power on the boards of various governing bodies.

Pro Parkour, Against Competition

The dissenters against competition are certainly fewer and less vociferous today. Still, in 2007, when the first Art Of Motion was announced, followed by the first Barclaycard Freerunning World Championships in 2008, people referred to themselves as *Pro Parkour, Against Competition activists*. On the *parkour.net* forum, everyone

adopted a banner with this maxim as their signature (for the readers who aren't millennials who have never seen a forum before: a signature is something you'd see under people's posts and replies). It was a ferocious movement that instigated arguments on an already heated battlefield amid the parkour vs freerunning skirmish.

Most of what was written against competition in the early days was, of course, in comment sections and forums written by emotionally fuelled teenagers who felt that their new and precious discipline was on the brink of having its soul siphoned out by giant corporate demons. However, a few sincere efforts emerged to accurately represent the community's underlying reasons. One of those was by Duncan Germain (AKA TK17). In 2007, following the first Red Bull Art of Motion, he wrote, "We believe we must stand together against ambitions that do not reflect the original philosophy of parkour and that are disrespectful to the parkour philosophy and the parkour community."

He then went on to list some reasons (some of which I have cut down for brevity, whereas some I have left because they're funny).

1. "We don't believe in elites. We don't believe in any form of selection among practitioners. We don't believe in the necessity of any form of hierarchy of performance among practitioners. We believe that being "the best" doesn't mean anything in parkour because winning or losing doesn't mean anything in parkour philosophy. We do not accept such a drive as part of the parkour philosophy. Instead, we believe the drive to train should always and only come from within. We strive to be stronger for ourselves and others, not against people, but with and for others. Therefore, we reject and disregard any form of rivalry between practitioners. Instead, we value mutual respect and solidarity in making progress as individuals and as a community."

2. "We believe it stands against the philosophy of parkour to compete to win or earn anything that is not part of parkour values, such as medals, prizes, trophies, money, fame, recognition, or glory. The same goes for showing off for a crowd. Instead, we look for priceless and beneficial outcomes to our actions. We also look for benefits we all can share. We are givers, not takers."

3. "Competition encourages the unready to sacrifice their health for early victories or reach a ranking without true meaning. It forces elite competitors to constantly and repeatedly endanger their most precious good, health, because of obsession and obligation of victory, and whatever is at stake as a direct consequence of it, including money, rank or status, pride, and also professional or sponsoring contracts and profitable commercial deals."

4. "Parkour doesn't belong to corporations, sponsors, media, or people sitting at home to watch. We believe we must not accept activities and plans that are abusively called parkour, that misuse its name and hijack its image to draw public and media attention to something that is NOT parkour, despite the resistance of the majority of the community against such intentions."

Yes, this is an unprecedented amount of gatekeeping. But a majority were entirely on board with these reasons. We were all steadfast in defending our precious "parkour philosophy" despite not having the foggiest idea of what it is! Amongst the righteous rambles of Duncan Germain, you may agree with a few points to an extent. However, when we see the majority of competitions and competitors today, it's easy to see how these premonitions were overdramatised. Aside from this, most who were compelled to oppose competition ultimately did so because...

Early Competitions Sucked

The fact that the first two competitions were an abysmal shit-show certainly helped buttress the arguments of the *Pro Parkour, Against Competition* crowd. The first competition was the 2007 Red Bull Art

Of Motion in Vienna. It featured a small, unruly group of males from teams such as Urban Freeflow, Tempest, and Air Wipp. The course was terrible, mainly comprised of scaffolding sets topped with wooden platforms. Crash mats were heavily distributed in key landing zones across the course to encourage people to throw down. It came off as an adrenaline-junkie hype fest, with contestants gesturing to amp up the crowd in a self-glorifying manner between haphazard flips, jumps, and breakdancing moves.

I remember being reasonably indifferent toward the whole feud. But upon watching the videos where Ryan Doyle threw a double-cork to a thick crash mat, missed it, broke his leg and got carted off the course on a stretcher... AND STILL WON FIRST PLACE... I decided competition probably wasn't the best idea.

At the 2008 Barclaycard World Championships at the Roundhouse in London, a Mexican calling himself Sarge did a colossal underbar gap to his ribs in front of an arena of people. That, mixed with seeing Marwan Elgamal scampering about the course, landing nothing but basic vaults. There's also a fantastic moment in Marwan's run where he jumps up and swings on a bar a few times as if generating momentum for a big bar trick or lache, but instead just aborts on the backswing and drops back to the ground. Again, they had thick crash mats to incentivise throwing ambitious flips, which they knew they couldn't land without.

With only these two travesties, concluding that competition was negative was incredibly easy. This was precisely the attitude and image the philosophy zealots had been fighting against. You didn't have to be steeped in the purist dogma to surmise that these events were shit and misrepresent what we were doing. Despite the bundles of ammunition these first events gave to the so-called anti-competition activists, they showcased the sport to new audiences and connected many parkourists from different countries, most of whom likely only knew each other from forum feuds. They worked well as a stage to showcase the athletes' skills to the public and exhibit newly developed tricks to the community. However, the injuries kept stacking up.

The 2009 Barclaycard World Championships sat slap-bang in the middle of Trafalgar Square in London. The event was televised on

BBC Three and Sky Sports with prime-time slots. Undoubtedly, this did wonders for gaining more interest in the sport and further legitimising what we do. I don't believe there has been another parkour competition to rival this one in scale and reach. However, the fact remains that the lines back then were a disaster. They weren't creating lines as we would today. They weren't even creating lines as they would in their training back then. They would nonchalantly potter around the course, wave to the crowd, do a sloppy flip, then showboat to the crowd some more, and repeat. Reviewing the early competition videos is fascinating. It's so archaic that it's almost cute.

Competitions have come a long way since then. The judging criteria have changed massively. Flow as a judging criterion exists now, or at least is taken far more seriously. So you no longer get people like Tim Shieff taking gold for spending most of their run in a handstand or a human flag. You will also see far better-connected runs, rather than jogging or dawdling about from obstacle to obstacle to perform different flips off platforms. And the biggest plus since flow was introduced is that there are no longer any embarrassing mid-run showboating or gestures to hype up the crowd, which strangely became the norm before. But the flow criteria being created didn't stop Joel Eggimann from interrupting his run to sniff a flower and Alex Schauer from knocking on a random door as mid-run jokes at Art Of Motion 2013 in Santorini.

One positive was that they conceded to the many complaints and removed the false sense of security that the crash mats provided. And although this now made competitors more inclined to go for flips they could actually land, George Mayfield still blew out a knee going for a double-side from a high platform.

The Birth of Speed Comps

For a time, comps were only suited to those inclined towards acrobatics. That was until Speed competitions started to emerge. The earliest I can remember or find is the 2009 Parcouring World Championships held in Berlin. It is funny how all these events were dubbed "world championships" even though they were all invite-only.

The event appeared to have substantial backing from various sponsors, as seemed more the norm back then. Watching the videos, it's hard to catch so much as a frame without a Rockstar Energy logo. The Speed event seemed more like a sideshow to Style. All competitors were undoubtedly invited for their skills in Style, not Speed. You could tell by how abysmally slow they completed the course, with a total inability to carry momentum and some exhausted forearm and knee climb-ups towards the end.

The following year, the event improved markedly, with more well-known hybrid athletes participating. While some Style specialists were still trying their luck, blundering their way through the course with stuttered steps, tentative vaults, and laboured climb-ups, some more well-rounded parkourists moved with precision, power, and purpose. Belgium's Gaetan Bouillet took first, and Brazil's Luis Alkmim took second. PWC 2011 saw Portugal's Pedro Salgado come first by a long shot. This was perhaps the first time the community saw a Speed specialist. In early Speed competitions, you often see people using conventional moves and methods, as seen in a line for a video. There was still an aesthetic and stylistic track running in their mind. When presented with an obstacle, their intuitions would conjure up a lazy vault or cat pass, not realising that, in most cases, they eat up more time on the clock because it takes too long to get back to the ground. However, Salgado moved like an animal. His movement was closer to Teige Matthews-Palmer's in his Rage Froobling period. And although we never saw Teige in a Speed competition, it's hard to imagine he would beat Salgado's raw power. He remained unbeatable for years to come. In 2018, even the new Speed superstar, Joseph Henderson, couldn't best Salgado in a couple of friendly time trials for Storm's series *Hendo Speed Challenge*. He was the first in the series to beat Henderson.

Before these events, a speed challenge was featured in the pilot of MTV's Ultimate Parkour Challenge, which aired in 2009. This is another excellent example of the US's early ineptitude with parkour, as most of the Americans involved maimed themselves on screen. Namely, Daniel Arroyo, when he folded himself in half, landing on his neck after violently peeling off a lache. Mike Turner fractured his foot, gashed open his hand and face-planted on a dive

front landing. And let's not forget the self-titled King David, who straight up bodied himself after sending an unrealistic perpendicular cat to a ladder, a storey up. As far as I know, that bail is the only thing King David is known for. All hail the king! This televised disaster was the US's first large-scale introduction to parkour. The Americans did a superb job of showing the world that parkour is a practice in which we manage risks appropriately! And, of course, they did a fantastic job convincing the anti-competition mob that the pressures of competition don't affect our judgment...

Red Bull's Short-lived Infatuation

A second Art Of Motion was held in an arena in Vienna in 2009. Again, fortunately, not a crash mat in sight. However, this didn't stop Paul 'Blue' Joseph putting a gaping hole in the wooden panel of the purpose-built structure with a ginormous, droppy running precision with a punch front out. (We could blame the course designers and the primitive building standards for underestimating the high forces of parkour. However, perhaps equal blame lies with Blue's giganewton-heavy, thunderclap landings.)

Red Bull hosted two Art Of Motions in 2009, the second held in Helsingborg, Sweden. They brought in a broader range of parkourists, like the Tempest's newcomer Ryan Houchin, who attempted a wall flip gap that came up short of the landing edge and fell multiple storeys, only to be miraculously caught by a tangle of wires. Houchin, likely feverishly adrenal, still improvised a couple more flips to end his line.

Red Bull was on a roll between 2010 and 2012. In that time alone, they held eleven Art Of Motions worldwide, including Vienna, Tampa, Boston, London, Yokohama, São Paulo, Detroit, Santorini, Failaka Island in Kuwait, and even an all-natural course at Verzasca Valley in Switzerland. They then died down in frequency for some reason, eventually settling into a single annual competition on the Greek island of Santorini. It changed to Matera, Italy, in 2019, after the first year without an Art Of Motion since 2009.

Santorini was unequivocally the prime location to hold the event, as the whole island was practically a parkour paradise. It became so iconic that gyms would replicate its features in their designs. Each town hosted endless stretches of pristine white rooftops, each with unique terrain, terraces, domes and scenic sea views. Every year, the island would become overrun with hundreds of vagabond parkourists from around the globe. All dispersed across the residents' rooftops and buzzing around the streets on rented quad bikes. I would bet that during the week of the competition, gyros sales would double, but unfortunately, so would property damage.

I've heard many people express confusion about why they changed it from this quintessential location. The course was great for competitors, and the island was great for the hundreds who flocked to watch and train. From what I've heard, that's precisely why Art Of Motion couldn't stay there. We became unbearable for the residents. Many clumsy and disrespectful delinquents broke property with abandon. Most do their best to be careful, but statistically, out of three hundred parkourists, you're bound to get a good few idiots. Damage aside, the thousands of shoe marks on the white walls were unavoidable. This is why we can't have nice things! It might also have had something to do with the small island's pre-existing problem with overtourism. The residents already dealt with an infestation of annoying tourists turning up in Oia by the busload, lining up to take the idyllic selfie-stick couples pic for Instagram. They didn't need the addition of hundreds of loud and smelly parkour miscreants jumping and sleeping on their rooftops for one week a year.

In the Santorini period, Red Bull introduced on-site qualification and online video submissions, similar to Urban Freeflow's failed FR World Series, except I didn't ruin it this time. (I did upload a parody submission of my worst bails edited to Norwegian black metal for AOM 2012, but the trend didn't take off this time...) Previously, the event was invite-only, which gave it an exclusive club feel. It would be wrong to claim they are the highest platform for competitive parkour if others outside the bubble they created weren't given a chance. The on-sites and online submissions allowed lesser-known talent to make a name for themselves, and, like Greece's Dimitris 'DK' Kyrsanidis and Ukraine's Alexander Titarenko,

win gold. Both are now Red Bull-sponsored athletes. DK became a celebrity in Greece. He has said, "If it weren't for the Red Bull Art Of Motion, I wouldn't be who I am right now"

Red Bull had always been averse to the idea of a Speed event. Even in 2021, for a new event, Red Bull Andalus, they finally decided to give it a shot by introducing a strange scoring system that incentivised tricks mid-course. Perhaps they couldn't imagine how parkour would be entertaining for spectators without them.

The last Red Bull Art Of Motion was in 2022 on the Greek island of Astypalea, though the format was rejigged again. The competition was divided into three days and three different rounds. The exploration challenge saw competitors roam freely and capture the best possible clip. The spot challenge saw competitors collaborate with cinematographers to capture a video sequence within the comp area. The live challenge was similar to the usual AOM format but with much shorter runs over three heats. In the past, they had always expected parkourists to perform 30-second to 1-minute-long lines, even though no one had ever trained them to string them out that long. Contestants would start their lines off strong, fill the middle with fluff and filler flow moves, then attempt to finish with a bang, which was often a bail. Many didn't have the endurance to fill the time. Of course, competitors could make the effort in training to improve aerobic capacity to meet this standard, but it's far better for competition formats to reflect the sport as it's naturally practised, rather than creating a standard that seems arbitrary in hopes of appeasing spectators. AOM's organisers mirrored the grassroots Sport Parkour League's Style format; shorter, snappier and more intense lines that pack a punch, rather than petering out at the tail-end.

I've heard from some of the competitors that Astypalea was their favourite AOM format yet, although, for those tuning in to the TikTok livestream at home, where they only saw the live challenge on day three, it was confusing to see that Travis Verkaik had won when Elis Torhall and Ed Scott both had higher scores. The whole thing felt slightly disjointed for the viewer. There hasn't been a Red Bull Art Of Motion since, and I've heard no news of plans for any in the future.

The Rise of Grassroots Comps

Things started heating up as community leaders from grassroots parkour organisations began hosting larger-scale competitions of their own. In 2012, Filip Ljungberg and Marcus Gustaffson of the Swedish group Airwipp stepped it up a notch when they held the first annual freestyle competition called The Airwipp Challenge. The first few were sponsored by an online gambling company called Betsafe, which you can *bet* the purist anti-capitalist and anti-competition activists made a stink out of. The Airwipp Challenge was consistently a huge-scale event. At first, they had cordoned off sections of the old Swedish town of Helsingborg, and the course was the common stage set up mixed with the city's natural gothic features. In 2015, they began hosting them in large indoor arenas with pyrotechnic displays and entertaining quirks, such as the hosts rappelling from the ceiling to kick off the show.

In 2012, another organisation from Seattle, Parkour Visions, hosted what seemed to be a precursor to Skill competitions. The event appeared to be a mix of set jumps, sequences, or courses, with a points system used to score them. Some of the courses were also timed; all in all, it seemed pretty confusing. The Skill traits of this event were inspired by a round of the Parkour British Columbia competition in Vancouver in 2011. In 2013, the PKBC event organisers René Scavington and Tom Coppola built the Origins Parkour gym in Vancouver, where they would hold the first North American Parkour Championships (NAPC). This was the first event to properly introduce Skill as a separate competition format alongside Speed and Style. This was an attempt to diversify competition to represent those whose training fell between the cracks of Speed and Style. Now those who were more challenge-based had a platform to test their power, confidence, and control on individual challenges or short, technical sequences. However, Origins' first iteration of Skill seemed more about how far or high you could execute single moves like cat pass, precision and dyno. They also were scored on execution and difficulty, rather than today's more familiar format of completing set challenges, where you either make it or you don't, against the constraints of a time limit or a limited number of attempts.

Later, from the NAPC came the Sport Parkour League (SPL), which still strives to set a gold standard for engaging competition formats that accurately reflect and represent how people train to maximise progress in athletic ability. Since 2013, they have been tinkering and tweaking their formula to the point that it's become unrivalled. SPL initiated the idea of a competition season, holding numerous regional competitions across North America. This allowed parkourists to qualify for the season finale at NAPC in Vancouver. Due to the increasing number of contestants from outside North America, NAPC was rebranded as SPL. In 2023, René and Tom finally made the leap and dubbed SPL the World Parkour Championships. They figured they might as well, seeing as so many other competitions already made that bold claim without any merit to back it up (especially those led by the colonial gymnastics federation). I would argue that the title is justified by SPL's consistent legitimacy and openness to making amendments based on contestants' critiques. Since then, they have joined forces with the United States Parkour Association and have begun hosting more regional qualifiers worldwide. They are also the first to launch a professional-standard pay-per-view live stream as a financial pathway to keep the event sustainable, with some proceeds going to the competitors.

Novel Formats

There is still a lot of room for innovation and experimentation in competition formats. Spot Destroyer and Parkour Takeover League run inclusive street competitions in which competitors complete as many set challenges within a city radius as possible. Gizmo Style Battles is a Style format emphasising creativity and innovation over difficulty and athletic prowess. The first World Chase Tag event was held in London towards the end of 2016. You have likely seen it, but if not, my abridged summary is that it's a tag game but with obstacles. It takes place on a relatively confined rectangular stage called *the quad*, which is densely filled with wooden and steel obstacles. The game was created in 2011 by brothers Christian and Damien Devaux, inspired by a tag game between Christian and his son, Orlando, in

their backyard. It has since gained massive media attention, with many of its videos going viral.

It was so popular and accessible to non-parkour audiences that, in 2020, the US television network Fox ruthlessly stole the idea, slapped a clichéd gladiator-style spin on it, and aired it as *Ultimate Tag*. A handful of North American parkourists made a good buck for dressing like sparkly spandex-wearing WWE wrestlers on national TV and adopting nicknames and a cringeworthy, fabricated persona to go along with it. (It's for US audiences; what else would you expect?) Nicknames such as Banshee, Dynamite, The Flow, Big Deal, Iron Giantess, Atomic Ant, and Doctor Dickbreath (ok, that last one I made up.) These nicknames are almost as bad as the parkour ones from the '00s. An Australian version of the show was shot, but it was cancelled before any episodes aired. The world never got to see Dom The Dominator and his adorable face makeup and bright red sleeveless hoodie.

The Devaux brothers of World Chase Tag were understandably upset about this flagrant rip-off. However, I'm not sure if you can copyright or own tag. But legalities aside, it was pretty unethical in principle. But then again, it is Fox after all. Despite Fox being snakes, World Chase Tag continues to succeed and has been featured on numerous TV networks, including ESPN, BBC, NBC, Fuji TV, NHK and Fox Sports. They also had an event at the 2023 Arnold's Sports Festival in Columbus, Ohio. This is a massive sports platform. And to make it even more surreal, Joey Adrian shared the commentator panel with Arnold Schwarzenegger himself. It's undoubtedly incredible that a parkour-adjacent sport is thriving and reaching such large audiences. However, I can't help but feel slightly annoyed that the competitions that best represent our sport can not yet wrangle public interest like this. World Chase Tag is easy to understand. It's a simple head-to-head format, and everyone has played tag. Skill and Style competitions are more challenging for the public to grasp and appreciate. And despite Speed comps being simpler to comprehend, they can often appear repetitive if you can't appreciate the subtle differences.

The creators of World Chase Tag never intended for the sport to be strictly a competition for parkourists. It was meant to attract

people from various athletic backgrounds, but like Ninja Warrior, which wasn't created with parkour in mind, our skills fit the format exceedingly well. But also, one doesn't necessarily have to practice parkour to excel. This was demonstrated during the 2021 UK championships when a member of the RunLDN team, whom they had recruited off the street two weeks prior, went head-to-head with the braggadocios Shane Griffin and tagged him. And the new RunLDN recruit had never trained before.

Although WCT is an exciting spectacle, it's a far cry from how the average person trains. It's certainly another great test of certain aspects of what we practice, especially as the name of the game is reach and escape. It would be a shame if parkour gyms started giving up funds and floor space for quads, as many gyms already pander to the public with various Ninja Warrior obstacles. In some gyms in the US, whole Ninja Warrior courses take up nearly half the gym space. WCT quads can cost up to $50,000. Ryan Ford posits, "It's simply an irresponsible and unsustainable financial decision." There's certainly value in having a space to practice leading up to tournaments. Still, as for pulling punters into the gym, I can't help but see it as a failure of our industry to rely on gimmicks such as quads, Ninja Warrior obstacles and Nerf battle birthday parties. Parkour should be cool enough. Perhaps we need to be better at showing it.

Another emerging anomaly we're starting to witness is how WCT is shaping up to become the type of spectator sport where the audience is bloodthirstily waiting for the next savage bail, given that most of the audience at these events is currently composed of fellow parkourists. No other parkour competition I've attended has a sadistic atmosphere, like the one occasionally seen around the quad. We often support all competitors, and competitors commonly support each other. It would be a shame to see something sadistic and fiercely competitive, like the UFC or ice hockey, infiltrate the parkour sphere. Even if they aim to distance the sport from parkour, it's unlikely to shake the association with it anytime soon.

Either way, WCT has potential as another avenue for financially supporting our professionals, thanks to two brothers who seem to care about parkour.

Actual Activism

Despite the growth and maturation of competition, which contributed to increasing acceptance across the international community, many anti-competition purists were still out there, seething beneath the surface. They watched helplessly from their moral high ground as their once-pure, intrinsically driven culture seemed increasingly polluted by prize money and podium glory. Although they never attended a competition, from an outside perspective, their beloved discipline was falling down the same slippery slope that other mainstream sports had fallen into as they became progressively more competitive. When you hear *Pro Parkour, Against Competition activist,* you're perhaps led to envision an all-bite-no-bark, keyboard warrior, mouth breather. But some ventured beyond online spats and engaged in legitimate activism.

I'll start with a more tame example. In 2013, there was a competition in Lisbon called Red Bull Reconquista. One of the invited competitors was Miguel Espada from Madrid. When it was his turn, he walked out in front of the audience, and instead of performing a run, he removed his hoodie to reveal a T-shirt that read, "Traceurs with no values = dead discipline." He presented the T-shirt to the audience and then exited the course. As I said, tame. But put yourself in Luis Alkmim's shoes (swap shoes with him, if you will!) He helped organise the event, invited the contestants, and then had to explain to the Red Bull guys why one of their invited athletes had thrown a little protest tantrum on stage.

At the São Paulo Art Of Motion in 2011, about forty to fifty Brazilian anti-competition zealots rushed the stage during the halftime music performance. No, I'm not exaggerating like Julie Angel most likely was in her book, with Charles and Malik being chased by a gang of fifty in Évry—there's video proof of this audacious stage rush. About ten of the group that invaded the stage wore clown masks and, for some reason, had an X over their mouths. My Brazilian friend Vance Poubel was one of the leading orchestrators of the protest, and he joyously told me the story while, ironically, we were preparing for a competition in São Paulo just three years later.

Which brings me to my last example. The 2014 Desafio Urbano (urban challenge) speed competition took place once again in São Paulo. It was a challenging 400m course in the middle of the city, with a wide variety of obstacles and drastic terrain changes—a truly exhausting and scary course. Halfway through, there was a gap from the railing of a bridge over a 3-4 storey drop. I don't believe anyone anywhere was prepared for a course like that, simply because the aerobic demands didn't match the short bursts most were accustomed to. The day before the event, we all practised our runs to prepare for the next day, when it would be televised on one of Brazil's biggest TV networks. We returned the following morning to find the course had been vandalised overnight. Cooking oil had been splattered over a lot of the course. It was eventually cleaned up and covered, and the show went on. But that's not the end of it. Halfway through the event, a large group of sanctimonious parkour activists showed up holding a huge banner that read "Pro Parkour, against competition."

So they vandalised the course in an attempt to stop the event, and then they dared to show up on the day to protest with a bloody banner!

The competition continued without a hitch, and if you're wondering how I did in the comp—I rolled my ankle on uneven ground not five seconds out of the starting gate... Before I had touched a single obstacle... On national television! As I said, on one of the biggest TV networks in Brazil! They flew an international athlete across the Atlantic, all expenses paid, and the floor takes this special guest out of the race. I spent the remainder of the event in the hospital getting a cast put on my leg for a sprained ankle, which I chopped off the moment I got back to my hotel room. There's a screenshot of the exact moment my ankle rolled, where it's inverted at a right angle, and my facial expression is neutral, as if it hasn't registered upstairs yet. Brilliant television!

The Good

Today, it feels like the anti-competition rabble has quieted down substantially. They certainly still exist, but they'll keep to themselves

in their niche conservative communities, apathetic and bitter that the community at large has long been far out of their control and influence. Even David Belle appeared to lower his guard in 2012 in a Twitter Q&A hosted by Take Flight. He replied to a question saying, "Before thinking about competition, I hope people learn Parkour correctly. Then we will see about friendly competitions. I am in favour of competitions to improve performance and bring people together. But I don't like the competitions to see who is the best."

In 2013 and 2014, another founder, Malik Diouf, even hosted two competitions of his own under the corny name Xtreme Gravity. Given how much our competitions have matured and the increasing quality of those run by grassroots organisations, it's hard not to get on board. We've demonstrated that we're capable of organising and funding our own events with less support from corporate sponsors. Also, we've seen that the environment at these events is far less corrosive and toxic than the purists of old prophesied. Rather than vitriolic rivalry, the atmosphere between contestants is usually supportive, and everyone genuinely wants to see others do well. The etymology of the word *compete* comes from the Latin *competere*, meaning "to strive together." Parkour competitions today align more with this – cooperatively pushing the bar and striving for collective excellence – than the common Machiavellian, dog-eat-dog associations with modern competition.

In 2021, Rachel Gough and Camila Stefaniu went head-to-head in a race at the Red Bull Andalus event in Spain. When they both reached the finish line, Camila appeared to be injured. Rachel rushed over to check if her fellow competitor was all right, comforted her, and then accompanied her to the hospital. Ed Scott practically acts as a parkour caddy to his fellow competitors during any Skill competition. He will offer chalk, towel down dusty or sweaty wood and bars, and give tips and words of encouragement. This supportive attitude becomes infectious, and soon everyone begins doing the same for each other. It creates an atmosphere where the competition becomes a bunch of friends all up against the monstrous challenges and the pressure of the ticking clock. There are countless examples of collaboration and camaraderie amid competition, because, after all, most competitors are psyched to train and compete alongside their

international friends and respected online figures. Without these kinds of events, they likely would never have met.

In a Jump Disclosure article about the Sheffield Takeover competition, Sam Coppack states, "It still bemuses me that this wonderful multigenerational 'spirit' of parkour so desperately protected by purist types, can so often be found in exactly the place they famously dislike: competition."

Of course, there are jams that serve this purpose as well. A significant difference is that, from a spectator's standpoint, a competition is far more watchable and understandable than just a jam. When it's put in a context with peaks of excitement, culminating in the climax of seeing who comes out victorious, it becomes far more relatable and easier for people with a lesser understanding of what we do to become emotionally invested. Seeing people perform at their best under pressure creates an electric environment. This pressure can pull the best performances out of people. At every SPL final at Origins Parkour in Vancouver, the room is absolutely on edge watching contestants push themselves under the pressure. And when something cutting-edge is landed successfully, the audience erupts from their seats in a cacophony of cheers. Whether competitors win or not, these high-pressure moments of excellence can be etched into parkour history.

Another difference between a competition and a jam is that jams don't offer a chance for talented parkourists to earn a bit of cash. Jams, although crucial for bringing the community together, are far less likely to serve as a profitable arm of our grassroots industry. Tickets for jams and events go to the organisers, who usually barely cover the costs of renting the space and equipment, and of the flights of invited athletes. Livestream tickets, spectator tickets and onsite qualification admission fees are all viable income streams for our competition industry. If Sport Parkour League and others can generate enough interest, we could see a future where titles carry enough weight to offer financial opportunities beyond just prize money.

The Bad & The Ugly

In a PK Theory blog post entitled *Parkour: Art or Sport?*, Matthias Mayer writes:

> "Arts evolve and diversify all the time. Sports do not evolve, but approximate the limits within their frameworks. This means that when you have a judging criterion, a speed course or any framework to sort individuals into rank, you tend to hone in and build within the confines of that framework. [...] The skill level within that frame is developing a lot, yet there are no fundamental breaks, no radical direction changes, and no gestalt switches, as found in the arts. That makes all future development of a sport pretty predictable. You can see this in all official sports, like gymnastics, football, tennis, etc. You might think they changed dramatically, but that dramatic change is not at a fundamental level... so it is not dramatic."

Gymnastics is an excellent example of this. They have sub-disciplines constrained by the unchanging standardised apparatus. They have rigid aesthetic traditions, rules and regulations woven into the practice. In the last hundred years, the athletic development of each sub-discipline has been phenomenal, but its progress is still predictable given the top-down constraints. Awareness of how parkour judging systems may similarly constrain competition to an increasingly narrow choke point is essential. Early on, we saw how Red Bull Art Of Motion's judging system influenced how people train and form lines outside competition. We have recently witnessed how FIG's Style judging system has moulded competitors' line choices into a constrained and predictable funnel. If we fail to apply pressure to organisers, we risk competition lines becoming entirely devoid of individuality, creativity and freedom, which are all characteristics we collectively celebrate and wish to maintain. Given how competitive norms can influence parkourists' daily training, we can expect to see more stale, robotic lines.

In April 2025, Benj Cave and I were tasked with commentating for the SPL European qualifier livestream at the Hal5 gym in Leuven. For the Style semi-finals, contestants had half the gym at their disposal to form a short and snappy line. Despite SPL's judging criteria highly valuing creative course interaction, and Hal5 being arguably the best gym in Europe, most contestants gravitated to the big slanted wall and the adjacent high bar. Hal5 offers boundless shapes and ingeniously designed structures that facilitate endless opportunities; however, the contestants, most of whom were steeped in the FIG judging system, couldn't shed their prior wiring. They could only form lines based on moves rather than adapting moves to the unique space. They had a predetermined idea of the tricks they wanted to perform and found the glaringly obvious obstacles where they could perform them. It was as if they saw the common features found in all gyms and purpose-built set-ups and simply ran the preloaded program. This resulted in a nauseating conveyor belt of near-identical lines. These parkourists have been moulded into carbon copies by FIG's claustrophobic judging system. Whilst commentating, I fought the urge to say, "Whoa! Another swing cast and wall full, poorly jammed together with a forward roll. Tantalising stuff..."

In his blog post, Matthias Mayer says, "I do not fear that competition parkour will be the only form of parkour in the future. Simply because sports cannot satisfy the creative urge of people, and so there will always be something going on outside of sports."

I optimistically agree with Matthias's sentiment. Parkourists will always be compelled to subvert existing and emergent norms. Matt McCreary founded Gizmo Style Battles in response to the dull, creatively oppressive Style competitions that were becoming increasingly prevalent. Still, creating such a distinct bifurcation is far from ideal. We should continue to pressure those developing judging systems to better represent the sport as it's widely practised, rather than allowing the judging system to influence the practice.

There have been countless injuries during competitions. It would be lying to say some don't push themselves beyond what's reasonable for them and accept higher levels of risk in these spaces. Even some of our most thoughtful and rational have had their better judgment

muddied by the pressures of competition. At Project Underground 2024 in the UK, Sam Coppack closed an exhaustingly long Style run with a ginormous height drop and shattered both his heels. Perhaps if he weren't giddy under the pressure of strictly performing the line as planned, he would have noticed his legs were tired from the line and in no good state to receive the forthcoming impact. Sam is not someone to put it all on the line for glory. He rose to the challenge purely to summon the best in himself. However, it didn't work out on this occasion, and hard lessons were learnt. Exactly one year on at the same competition, he still threw his hat in the ring and put together a line that, although far less striking than the year prior, served as a celebration of how far he had come in his recovery. Sam still gave his best, but it didn't detract from the long and painstaking recovery process of the last year. The lesson learnt was not that competition is bad, as concluding this would equate to claiming that challenge itself is bad.

The same pressure that can act as an incredible flow-state hack can also produce some terrible decisions. Still, occasionally shit just goes wrong—as with everyday training. I could fill multiple pages with stories of disastrous injuries from competitions. However, I could fill just as many pages with injuries that occur outside competition, where people push themselves without the allure of a trophy or cash prize.

Undoubtedly, some people harbour competitive attitudes to the point of being problematic. Attitudes that don't serve their own self-esteem, and give rise to behaviours that make them a chore to be around. When Bob Reese didn't get his online submission line picked to qualify for Art Of Motion 2019, maybe he should have just taken it on the chin instead of posting four minutes of sulking and criticising the judging system on his Instagram story. And I quote, "Three out of the four people did double-side on concrete, maybe I shoulda did that. That's way easier than A-twist in, back out, which I did at the end of a line. I could have easily done a double-side on concrete wherever in a line because double-sides are so freakin' easy for me."

And then, when he finally did qualify for Art of Motion 2021, he made it to the finals and chose to squander his opportunity by

grabbing a chair and doing an A-twist with it in hand, nearly knocking out a cameraman.

Another example is Tempest's Cory DeMeyers, when he threw a tantrum over the battle style judging at NAPC 2014. And let's not forget Augustin Ciavaldini from Blacklist, who got caught during a World Chase Tag tournament, then started crying, jumped over the barrier to exit the course and topped it off by punching a wall.

At Project Underground in 2017, a teenager in the youth division finished his first Style run and left the course limping and visibly in pain. He then hobbled through his run in finals, clearly having a hard time. Judges Kie Willis and Lynn Jung refused to score the boy's run because he was wantonly endangering himself, risking further damage for the sake of podiuming in a small-fry youth competition. The boy's mother storms over (pun intended again), enraged at Kie and Lynn for not scoring the run. She asked, "What kind of message are we teaching our kids if we let them give up?!"

It's highly concerning that the mum was encouraging her child to continue on a damaged ankle to win a few quid at a small competition in a gym in Rotherham. Giving up is not always an admission of weakness; it's often necessary for self-preservation. We should want to do our best, as long as it doesn't prevent us from being our best. Sometimes, our expedient decisions wind up being self-destructive in the long run. Perhaps it was harsh for Kie and Lynn to force their values upon the boy and assume they knew what was best. For all they knew, perhaps that little competition was the only thing the kid was training for. Maybe it was a Make-A-Wish foundation kid, and all he wanted was to win a parkour comp before he croaks from leukaemia... We can't assume that everyone wants to train for the long run. Values and motivations vary. It's their choice if they want to give their all for a few years and completely abuse their bodies for the sake of glory and fame. Although perhaps like you, the idea of a mother imposing these self-disregarding values on their child boils my blood! Kie and Lynn's decision set a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable standards in terms of competitive mentality. What would you have done? I would have just given the run a low score. I mean, how good could the run have been with a gammy ankle and leukaemia?

I have seen countless parkourists compete despite injuries. Noa Diorgina Man and Miranda Tibbling have been frequent offenders. However, many parkourists now place so much mental stock in competition. When most of their training is geared toward competing, they feel it makes sense to make some sacrifices. It's their goal and what they find meaningful to pursue. As competition grows within parkour and the stakes increase due to larger prize pools and sponsorship opportunities, we can only expect that more of this "no pain, no gain", "all or nothing", and "do or die" mentality will be shifting people's priorities further from self-preservation and more to expedient short-lived success. It breaks my heart to witness young competitors like Miranda Tibbling make these short-sighted sacrifices and risk shortening what would otherwise be a long career. When some are so young, with many opportunities to win medals ahead of them, it may be more conscientious to take a big-picture view and pick their battles more wisely.

In the future, maybe we can expect to see more pushy parents who are vicariously living through their kids, abusively forcing them toward success to pay for their mortgage while disregarding their physical and mental health. This would be a bleak future for parkour competition. The fact that this has happened to so many sports means it can happen to ours if we're not careful. When Kie and Lynn refused to score the injured kid's line at Project Underground, they were drawing a firm line for what they were willing to accept within parkour's competition culture.

At Project Underground, it has become common to see large groups of kids arriving with their coaches, all competing in the youth division wearing their gym's uniform. Upon seeing this, my initial thought was, "What a cool day out for these kids. It's awesome that their gym has organised a trip for their students to come and showcase all they have learnt and feel represented on the competitive stage alongside their heroes."

However, my mind struggles not to wander and envision a darker future where these fun and exciting day trips are more akin to that of gymnastics squad competitions. Instead of enjoying a fun day out, they face the stress and pressure imposed upon them to represent

their squad to the best of their ability and win trophies for their gym at all costs. In training, I envision coaches yelling at underperforming students and threatening to remove them from the squad. I envision a rigorous selection process that takes on only the highest-ranked kids and excludes the less talented—creating a mindset that their worth is based solely on their ability to win medals. Worst of all, after competitions, I envision children being punished with petrol station sandwiches for dinner on the drive home instead of a celebratory meal at Pizza Express or Zizzi if they had won medals for their gym.

And then I snap out of it to the sound of applauding parents and other parkourists, seeing kids high-fiving each other after their runs. I realise this potential future is far from where we are presently, but we must acknowledge the slippery slope that may lead down that road. If our culture puts competition as an end goal on a progressively higher pedestal, we risk encouraging a sense of conditional self-worth —a self-perception of one's value as a human being based on output and achievements above all else. We risk robbing parkourists of what is intrinsically valuable to the experience.

A French parkourist, Valentine Dubois, has been relatively open about his feelings regarding what seems like a self-destructive path enabled by the pursuit of competition glory. Valentine is honest and upfront about his dream of becoming the Speed "world champion". In an Instagram caption after coming in sixth place in Speed at Apex International 2018, he wrote:

> "I don't even know where to start, but this performance was garbage. With all the training I put in, it's unacceptable. And yes, I got better; many people came to acknowledge it, and guys, thank you from the bottom of my heart. It means a lot! But of course, I got better. No shit. I am making so many sacrifices to improve in parkour, and my will is so strong that it cannot be otherwise. I came to the USA two years ago and did my first-ever parkour competition. Back then, I couldn't even qualify for the main event. In 2017, I went to Canada for NAPC and couldn't qualify again. But I kept training and believing in myself with an anime mindset – more Sasuke

than Naruto – saying fuck you to genetics. This time, I could qualify, but let's be honest, it's because the real speed gangsters were not there. I refuse to be the guy filming his friends because what he does is not "good enough" to be worth noticing. No one gives a shit if you're 6th. If you're 1st, yes, 2nd, ok, 3rd, maybe you get a little Instagram mention, but after this, you disappear from the human gene pool. Because this competition game is a beautiful metaphor for life itself, it's the same as being rejected by someone romantically. Put this in perspective of an animalistic approach, and it means that you won't be able to expend your DNA lineage—the ultimate death. That's why it's so scary for some men even to try approaching women. By definition, everything is competition. Look inside a drop of water; everything is fighting. We have made it this far as a species because of competition, and it's probably competition that will cause the end of the human race. When you lose a competition, you have two choices: giving up and whining about it or building resilience and evolving. I won't stop here!"

Okay... I know what you're probably thinking—wow! Clearly, he chose to whine about it. The amount of grandiosity and seriousness spilling out of this Instagram caption is concerning. And it's impressive how he managed to squeeze in some classic incel tropes. I don't know how much anime one must consume to reach such levels of gravitas and Main Character Syndrome, but Valentine has apparently watched enough. My favourite comment was from Montreal's Mich Todorovich, whom Valentine respected as an idol and mentor. Mich commented frankly, "That's a lot of blabla. Think less, my friend. Sometimes you win, sometimes you learn."

I imagine this coming from the sensei must have stung hard. Valentine is great at parkour, but is far from the most talented in Speed competitions. "Speed gangsters" of the time, like Joseph Henderson, Brandon Douglass, David Nelmes, Davis Vasconcellos and Pedro Salgado, barely needed to train specifically for competitions beyond their regular training. They are just really good at them. Yes,

their style and training preferences have undoubtedly contributed to their success, but when it comes to raw speed, there is no denying that genetics also play a significant role. It's a hell of an undertaking for anyone not genetically gifted to sacrifice everything and put all their time and energy into training to be the best.

Valentine regularly trained time trials. He followed rigorous programmes, lifted weights to increase his strength and power. He hired professional track coaches to improve his sprint speed. He spent a long time in the US, training in Denver under the tutelage of Speed coach Ryan Ford. He even splurged a total of €4000 to train with Ido Portal in Thailand at one of his superfluous movement camps. It's inspiring the lengths he went to. But still, the universe doesn't owe anyone success, no matter how hard they have worked. Life doesn't work like anime, where a training montage is all that's needed to come out victorious. Even if he were to miraculously win against the naturally talented greats after all this specific and supplementary training, if the genetically gifted greats were to put their efforts into similar training, they would inevitably wipe the floor with poor Valentine the next time. There are numerous ways to close the gap between genetically talented people and those who aren't. Still, those who came off the factory line as a Bugatti Veyron will always win against a Nissan Micra, even with A-grade tuning, especially if the Bugatti also gets some special tuning. The best the Nissan can do to win is hope the Bugatti's engine spontaneously blows out or crashes. (Which is precisely how the Nissan Micra, Cory DeMeyers from Tempest, won Red Bull Art of Motion in 2013...)

What was sad about Valentine's story is that he could not appreciate how far he had come since orienting himself toward his grand goal. His mind seemed primarily focused on the outcome rather than the experience of the process and what he had achieved from it. Many would be happy to have the opportunity to be on the same course as the speed gangsters and to give their best alongside them. It's also sad that he couldn't see his performance in this one competition as a success, purely because of the experience and valuable information he had gained. Rather than seeing it as a valuable stepping stone to orient his training, he saw it only as a failure. What if he never becomes "world champion" and is excluded

from the "gene pool"? What if he is never heralded as the best at speed competitions? Will he never feel satisfied with everything he's gained while chasing this elusive and unrealistic goal? He may never feel proud of what he has become or of everything that has brought him there, because he was measuring himself against the goal rather than his past self. And it's even more sad considering that his goal was usually impeded by other competitors' abilities, which he had no control over.

On the other hand, what if Valentine did attain his grand goal and stood atop the podium and felt entirely empty? This is a common story heard from even Olympic athletes—those who have spent their entire lives chasing the grand goal of Olympic success. What if Valentine felt like he'd been climbing the ladder for so long, only to realise it was propped up against the wrong wall? If you hold this level of competitive attitude, eventually, when you're bent up and broken from the highly demanding training, all that may be left is bitterness and resentment.

At NAPC 2018, Valentine finally qualified for the main event with the fastest time. He reached the finals and ranked seventh among the "speed gangsters". But during the competition, something had visibly changed. He seemed to be having the best time. After finishing his runs, he would sprint across the gym and bounce up and down in front of the livestream camera with the biggest grin. His energy was electric, and he now just seemed psyched to be there, no matter the result.

Competition is NOT the problem. If competition brings out negative competitive traits in people, it's their issue to figure out. If competition reveals something within yourself – whether that be insecurities about yourself or resentment for another, maybe you ignore vital signals about your ability, your body, your current headspace, or the environment that you would typically listen to in a usual training setting – that's not competition's fault—it's your own. The same applies to overly competitive people when casually training with friends in the street. Any environment is a competitive environment if you're an intolerably competitive arse. Suppose pathological competitive traits are a part of you and negatively affect

your health, your relationship to movement and the experience of those around you. In that case, those traits will likely follow you wherever you go. In competition, or not. In parkour, or not.

In truth, competitive attitudes are likely present wherever you look. I've witnessed some purists being competitive about how non-competitive they are! A great thing about our culture is that we've always encouraged people to recognise these socially corrosive and self-destructive traits in themselves and to strive for collaboration and camaraderie. Long may this continue.

It has its Purposes

Competition is here to stay. A large competition circuit enables us to grow the sport and build an infrastructure that provides more opportunities for skilled parkourists to earn a living from parkour, even if those opportunities are relatively meagre right now. Competitions are another celebration of some of our finest athletic and organisational talents. The often overlooked organisational aspects demonstrate our legitimacy and independence as a sovereign, self-determining sport. They show the world we're not simply the disorganised ragtag street rats we're all too often assumed to be.

Some worry that competition may overshadow training for its own sake, and beginners may become motivated solely by trophies, medals, and titles, rather than other intrinsic motivations. There is a fear that increased sportisation will produce more Valentines who can't see the forest through the trees. This is a genuine concern, but perhaps an unlikely premonition. I doubt anyone from outside of the sport will see competitions and conclude that that's what parkour is all about. The chances are, they have already witnessed parkour in a non-competitive setting. And if competition is someone's first impression of parkour, it's more likely that the movement will draw them to the sport rather than the prospect of medals, glory and prize money. The existence of competition doesn't detract from parkour as an art form.

Sport parkour and non-competitive parkour can coexist without conflict. Conflict will arise only when community leaders

place excessive value on competition as an end in itself. As soon as members of your community feel undervalued as individuals because of their competition performance or unwillingness to compete, you have failed to cultivate a community with a healthy, sustainable outlook on parkour. It is possible to cultivate a community that rewards both playful and ambitious traits without creating a sense of conditional self-worth.

Competition has its purpose, but it is not the overall purpose. Anyone claiming that winning competitions is unquestionably parkour's end goal is wrong, as this disregards all those whose motivations go no further than fun, self-expression, personal development and hanging out with friends. Millions of people who run don't do it competitively. Running as an activity isn't necessarily competitive, but it does have a competitive element, whether for races or Strava KOMs. Some may become increasingly driven to train for competition if they perceive it as a viable way to grow both as a professional athlete and as a person. Some may turn to competition to spice up their training if they have recently felt dissatisfied and unmotivated. Some may argue that this additional motivation is inherently impure and that one should draw motivation solely from within. This is an unrealistic, idealistic expectation for everyone, and it doesn't reflect how things pan out in the real world. The unmotivated will often enjoy a session once it's underway, but the most challenging part can be feeling like there's a good reason to put on their trainers and leave the house. Having competition as your reason is still far better than feeling as though there is no reason. I'm sure anyone unmoved by this argument will concede that the motivation to train for competition is better than having none at all, which would result in quitting parkour and doing nothing. Competition as someone's motivation to train is no more impure than simply being with friends at the spot as a primary motivation. Both are equally valid reasons that lead people to move and engage with the sport, so long as it remains enjoyable.

At the same time, many of us just wish to train, improve, surround ourselves with a supportive community, and produce and share video content. And maybe dip our toes into competition occasionally as another fun way to challenge ourselves. We may even

expose ourselves to some unrealised weaknesses in our practice. Competing in Skill or a Takeover comp, where you are given various challenges, might reveal that you haven't practised the diverse range of swings you thought you had. It might uncover that your ambidexterity for several skills is trash. Having these flaws laid bare unambiguously is good information if we aim to be well-rounded and squeeze the most out of our practice. We can fall upon these insights in daily training, but we often subconsciously choose challenges that play to our strengths. Maybe forming a style line and performing it with the pressure of only having one chance to execute is what's needed as a challenge to reveal cracks in our game. Or keeping yourself composed under the pressure of the audience; maybe the challenge of being relaxed in that environment is what's needed. How do the most ardent anti-competition purists know that participating in a competition isn't exactly what they need to grow as a parkourist and a person? Maybe it's just the challenge they need to elicit the introspective process they've lacked in their daily training. If challenges can be found everywhere, competition is just another rich and fertile environment. Even if placing lower on the leaderboard makes you feel sad, that is also a challenge to unravel.

Chapter 15 - FIG

So what exactly was different in 2017, when Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG) came barging in and offered up the sovereignty of our sport to the International Olympic Committee on a silver platter? Why has this created such an ideological rift in our community that has continued for nearly a decade? In the past, our hyper-sensitive alarm bells have sounded over many potential attacks on parkour's unique identity, only eventually for the rabble to simmer and adopt the new ways, albeit with some kicking and screaming. Why might this pose a more serious threat? At a point where parkour has failed to resist the norms of the late-capitalist and neoliberal world, what remains to be lost?

The Backstory

All popular accounts of this tale tend to begin in February 2017, when FIG's newly elected President, Morinari Watanabe, announced in a press release that they had set their sights on developing parkour as a new gymnastics discipline. However, this skips over some crucial and very telling details in our story. To overlook them, we lose some critical behind-the-scenes incentives.

Mark Dolley was head of communications for the International Olympic Committee from 2003 to 2006. He then briefly served as chief executive of the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf, tasked with securing the future of the Deaflympics after a late-minute cancellation of the Winter Games in 2011 due to a massive embezzlement scandal by his predecessor. It's rumoured that Dolley was booted for allegations of making derogatory comments about deaf athletes. (How did they hear?) There were also supposedly allegations of financial impropriety. However, details are now based on hearsay, as all records have since mysteriously vanished from the web. Following his departure, Mark's surname magically changed

from *Dolley* to *Cooper,* and so began his uphill slog to try to shoehorn his way back into the sports bureaucracy world.

My first time meeting Mark was around 2013. Some friends and I were training at the crazy golf course by Sui Wall on Brighton seafront when a big bearded bloke, perhaps in his mid-forties, came over and spoke to us about how he was close with some of parkour's founders. I recall him claiming to have taught David Belle English at school in France. (If true, he hadn't done a great job of it.) I kept bumping into Mark over the next few years as we both lived in Brighton. He would also occasionally appear at events like Tempest's *From Here to There* film screening in London. He seemed a gentleman who was tremendously passionate about parkour. He once gave my friend Jai Battrick a GoPro without expecting anything in return. He would tell me excitedly that Tehran had a flourishing female parkour community outdoors because restrictions in other sports prohibited gender mixing.

Another chance encounter while training on Brighton seafront, he told me that David Belle was planning a comeback and intended to engage with the community again. I don't remember him divulging any further details, but essentially, he alluded to something monumental in the works.

In July 2014, a 24-minute interview with David Belle was released on Storm Freerun's YouTube channel. This caught everyone by surprise, especially as all written interviews with David around that time came from parkour.com, and there was no guarantee it wasn't all fabricated by Adam Dunlap. The interviewer was the community's then-beloved Timothy Shieff, with Giles Campbell Longley behind the camera; however, the man behind the scenes, organising the interview, was none other than Mark Cooper. At the interview's outset, Shieff asks, "What brings you to Lausanne?" Belle replies, "Many things are going to change for parkour. I am here to help parkour move forward. It's true that I don't get around much, but I've started to meet some interesting people who are enabling me to do what I've always wanted to do with parkour."

It was unusual for everyone that this interview had suddenly sprung up from nowhere. For the past ten years, communities and

individuals have repeatedly attempted to engage with David, but he has shown little to no interest. Historically, he'd been one of the least community-minded individuals in the history of parkour, despite being such a key player in its inception. Aside from his inspirational early videos and torturing Stephane Vigroux and his other early disciples, David had never been a leader in any way. So when Cooper dragged him to a meeting at the International Olympic Committee headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, you can assume a palm had been greased with silver, so to speak.

However, what is curious and widely unknown about this period is the various groups that suddenly sprang into existence, all clamouring to federate for the same goal of attaining official recognition from bureaucratic sports governing bodies. Victor Bevine and David Thompson were both Hollywood actors who stumbled upon parkour and soon after struck a deal with MTV to produce *MTV's Ultimate Parkour Challenge*, which first aired in 2009. The show was anything but a success and failed to secure a second season. However, the two former actors clung to the sport and founded the World Freerunning and Parkour Federation (WFPF). Despite claiming to be a federation, it acted no differently from any other for-profit parkour company: selling clothing with its obnoxious logo emblazoned across the front. Similar to Urban Freeflow, they acted as a talent agency, mainly for the stars of the discontinued MTV show. They also developed a coaching qualification to add to the saturated sea of other parkour qualifications in the US.

In 2014, the for-profit company WFPF formed the non-profit International Parkour Federation (IPF) and applied for formal recognition from SportAccord, the umbrella organisation for all Olympic and non-Olympic sports federations. For the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to consider your sport for the games, international federations must be recognised by SportAccord. The lure of the Olympics aside, becoming a recognised international federation grants power and influence. It opens doors to national sports councils' resources and eligibility for government funding. Although one can assume that Bevine and Thompson had their eyes set on the Olympics as their crown jewel. Once accepted as an Olympic sport,

the associated federation receives funding from the IOC based on viewership.

In response, Parkour UK's CEO, Eugene Minogue, clubbed together with Parkour Generations' CEO, Dan Edwardes, and Street Movement's CEOs Mikkel Rougaard and Martin Kallesoe, and hurried to cobble together The International Federation of the Arts of Displacement (FIADD) and gunned for SportAccord recognition in an attempt to thwart Bevine and Thompson. There can only be one recognised federation for a sport under SportAccord, and with two applicants, it became a race to be the first. A mad power struggle ensued, with both FIADD and IPF approaching various parkour organisations across the globe, urging them to form national governing bodies to be represented as affiliate members under their slapdash global federations. This was an attempt to gain legitimacy in SportAccord's eyes, thereby solidifying their chances of formal recognition.

FIADD gained a substantial upper hand in legitimacy in the eyes of the parkour organisations by forging alliances with the Yamakasi and Sébastien Foucan as representatives. IPF, on the other hand, boasted two representatives from the UK who WFPF had been in cahoots with for years: Ryan Doyle and Sam Parham—two gents who were far from ideal representatives of the international community. Ryan Doyle had a long history of embarrassing parkour as a Red Bull-sponsored athlete with his near-incoherent verbal diarrhoea. Later, Red Bull dropped him, but that didn't stop him from desperately clinging to his heyday by wearing their clothing for the following years. It has been rumoured that his actions during his tenure at Red Bull have put Red Bull UK entirely off sponsoring parkourists. If you've ever wondered why the likes of Joe Scandrett or Ed Scott don't have a Red Bull deal, you can fairly confidently put it down to Ryan allegedly eating a spaghetti dish with his hands at a formal Red Bull dinner meeting, while likely parroting conspiracy theories he'd heard on Info Wars with pasta sauce caked around his mouth. Red Bull must have come away assuming we're all this tapped. It has also been said that in the lead-up to the prophesied apocalypse on December 21, 2012, Ryan exchanged all his money for gold. In case you didn't notice, the world didn't end…

Sam Parham is another washed-up parkourist whose most significant contribution to the sport was his 2007 *Poetry In Motion* video, which is likely among the top three cringiest parkour videos of all time. It featured an embarrassing attempt at spoken-word poetry about parkour, which is so on the nose that I cannot bring myself to quote it, as I worry putting it into print might contaminate the entire book. (Fun fact: this was the first parkour video Hazal Nehir saw that got her into training. Luckily, at the time, she didn't understand English enough to be deterred.) On top of this, some simpleton from YouTube's Base79 appointed Parham as one of the content creators for YouTube's own parkour channel called Flow. Tim Shieff also held the same role and curated and created some brilliant, diverse content for the community, funded by Google's deep pockets (the total funds for the Flow channel were a whopping £250,000). The best Sam Parham could conjure up was *Fusion League*. Parham and his 3Run pals created a GCSE media studies-level fictional action series. It involved crummy parkour, mediocre martial-arts choreography in silly costumes, and dismal attempts at acting.

Although the founders and Parkour Generation's Dan Edwardes may be out of touch with the broader community beyond the parkour conservatives wearing oversized, colourful Skochypstiks pants, Doyle and Parham not only lack a finger on the pulse but also have extensive résumés of egregious, cringe-inducing transgressions.

FIADD stormed ahead, wrangling thirty-two affiliate organisations from countries including Brazil, Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Indonesia, Singapore, Denmark, and Sweden. They were eight national members shy of SportAccord's requirements for formal recognition. There were promising signs of headway with SportAccord, with Sébastien Foucan delivering a talk on stage at their convention in April 2014.

Somewhere along the line, Mark Cooper found himself on board with FIADD. With his long history in sports bureaucracy and connections in Olympic circles, they considered him a valuable asset in their race against IPF. Additionally, Cooper, likely aided by his fluent French, successfully brought David Belle into the fold. This cause was the first thing to bring the founders together as one since

Foucan and Belle split from the Yamakasi in February 1998. A photo taken during a FIADD meeting in July 2014 shows David Belle, Sébastien Foucan, Williams Belle, Charles Perrière, Malik Diouf and Châu Belle Dinh all side-by-side at the lake in Lisses with their old friend, the Dame Du Lac, standing majestically in the background. Comments on the Facebook post were to the tune of, "That's what I wanted to see. Finally… My life is complete now."

Stephane Vigroux commented, "Beautiful and Powerful!"

However, this long-awaited reunion was not to last. Once Cooper was among their ranks, it's said that he swiftly manipulated the founders and poached them to form his own federation, The Mouvement, in September 2014. David, Williams, Châu, Malik, Charles and Sébastien were sold on a hopeful dream of a bright future for parkour. In their initial press release, Sebastién said, "We will measure the success of The Mouvement on our ability to create positive social change through freerunning, parkour and l'art du déplacement."

David, who was appointed as the temporary president of The Mouvement, said, "What we have created means so much to so many people that it is now logical for us to continue to promote the practices of parkour, freerunning and l'art du déplacement while also working to protect our community. That is why we have created this new Mouvement."

So much hope and positivity. Although from the get-go, Sébastien was wary of engaging in politics, and told the others right from the outset, "If I see anything suspicious where people try to benefit over others, I will leave without explanation."

Yann Hnautra and Laurent Piemontesi had their doubts from the start and refused to join. Laurent told me, "I don't know the motivation of Yann, but mine was very simple: I don't trust Charles and David. They do not know how to work in a group, and they do not have this family spirit. So I refused to caution it and lose time on it. And events after showed me I was right."

During one meeting at the IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Sébastien noticed evident favouritism and shady discussions behind closed doors. He told me, "Alliances started to be created instead of unification, and my instinct said: fuck that bullshit. I'm out! Let them

deal with their plan, but without me being a part of it. I told Mark Cooper that I will never ever speak with him again."

Sébastien's bullshit detector must have been set to eleven, as, after all the talk of protecting the community and creating positive change, it came to light that Cooper, David, and Charles went behind the others' backs to sow an allegiance with the International Gymnastics Federation. And, needless to say, without any input from the international community. In a Facebook post from May 18th 2017, Châu wrote:

> "As a member of The Mouvement, jointly with Malik Diouf and Williams Belle, we just found out together that an agreement is about to be concluded between the FIG and the current president of The Mouvement, Charles Perrière, backed up by David Belle and Mark Cooper, and without our input and knowledge. Indeed, we received no information or prior communication on the subject, nor have we received any updates on its status to date. [...] Moreover, I do not see any legitimacy in Mark Cooper when it comes to representing the views of practitioners. For your information, he was appointed as a consultant to help us structure the practice despite its diversity. We thought we would work together on a sound basis, with respect and trust. However, Mark Cooper is selling the fruit of the hard work brought in by all Art Du Déplacement, parkour, freerunning founders and by all the community of teachers and practitioners who contributed for years to develop the discipline in freedom of exchange and sharing."

The founders were used as pawns in a game that ultimately benefited two of them. What was supposed to be democratic governance, agreed upon by members and affiliate national governing bodies, came down to the say of a few, and then ultimately, in the hands of gymnastics. Rather than enduring the painstaking process of SportAccord recognition, Cooper, Belle, and Perrière chose expedience, thereby relinquishing our autonomy and self-governance.

This was Mark Cooper truly encapsulating David's A-to-B efficiency philosophy in the most reckless way possible.

A document titled "*Roadmap for Parkour*," dated May 4, 2017, was leaked on Facebook and clearly outlined FIG's plans for the next three years. The Mouvement was to be dissolved and merged with FIG. A test event was to take place in Montpellier later in May. They would develop a World Cup series with three events in both 2018 and 2019, and a World Championships every two years, starting from 2020.

Youth Appeal

FIG is the oldest established international sports federation and has been involved in the Olympic Games since its revival in 1896. What might FIG and the IOC want with parkour, you ask? We can optimistically speculate on possible laudable intentions all day long, but it doesn't take a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that it's a cold-hearted cash grab.

Previously, at least in the UK, gymnastics was actively distancing itself from parkour due to concerns that it was too dangerous and difficult to insure. The Jump London and Jump Britain documentaries led to a massive influx of ragamuffin teens flooding their open gym sessions, setting up huge double kongs between vault horses, hucking flips onto crash mats, and regularly getting banged up. Parkourists who wanted to learn moves within the soft and forgiving confines of gymnastics gyms were either turned away or weren't allowed to try many of the moves they wanted because they were deemed unsafe by the gymnastics censor.

Then, in 2013, likely due to a precipitous decline in male participation, British Gymnastics began capitalising on the growing popularity of parkour and introduced FreeG classes (freestyle gymnastics) in its gyms across the UK. It has since spread to many other countries. If FreeG evokes an image of a bastardised soft-play version of parkour taught by crusty gymnastics instructors, that is unequivocally accurate. This was viewed by many as a brazen encroachment on our sport. By 2013, we already had plenty of

established coaching companies. FreeG was actively poaching willing students from our classes. Beyond the patronage, students received a heavily watered-down version of the activity they wanted to learn. The FreeG coaches, who have never felt the rugged, harsh caress of concrete, were teaching skills that kids may ultimately try outside. Soft-play skills are largely incompatible with the unforgiving reality of the outdoors.

Gymnastics' capital-driven attitude towards parkour as a difficult-to-insure pack of heathens continued to shift in 2013 after the IOC president Thomas Bach launched what he dubbed *Agenda 2020*: a strategic roadmap to modernise the Olympics to ensure its future as a top dog in sport. It was primarily a policy document that emerged from their recognition of the intensifying global scrutiny of corruption and the IOC's lack of transparency. It was essentially a shallow attempt to rebrand. A key part of Bach's plan was developing urban and lifestyle sports to appeal to younger audiences. The IOC experimented with introducing youth-centric lifestyle sports in the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Snowboard slopestyle, ski slopestyle and ski half-pipe events were added to the roster. As TV viewership declined, they also trialled online streaming of the games to reach a younger audience whose viewing habits had shifted to devices rather than television.

The new winter events were a total mess, with organisers forcing athletes to fling themselves up to 20 feet into the air amid heavy winds, even as they postponed or cancelled less hazardous traditional events. Unable to maintain control and speed in adverse weather, many crashed hard or dramatically scaled back their planned runs. Aside from the wind, Shaun White and Torah Bright said the slopestyle course was too dangerous. Bright told the press, "We're here as the world's best snowboarders. Too bad we don't have a world-class course. The craftsmanship doesn't match the world-class athletes that are here."

Shaun White pulled out of slopestyle to focus on the half pipe. However, as far as the viewership ratings were concerned, the experiment was viewed by the IOC as a great success. They were keen to reel in young viewers who tune in to the X Games and Gravity

Games, and to ride on the coattails of established celebrities in their action sports.

With his keen ear to the ground in the sport bureaucracy world, Mark Cooper knew the burgeoning and innocent parkour was a perfect fit for Bach's Agenda 2020 and was ripe for the plucking without any formally recognised federation of its own. As mentioned, participation and popularity in men's gymnastics were at an all-time low. Not only does the IOC grant money to federations based on their viewership numbers in the Olympics, but they're penalised for not meeting diversity quotas—in gymnastics' case, more women than men. This, combined with the Agenda 2020 incentive to modernise, it's not hard to imagine how FIG reacted when Cooper turned up on their doorstep in Lausanne, arm-in-arm with two of parkour's founders, practically offering up our sovereignty on a plate.

Fight Fire with... Letters

In early 2017, Ryan Ford and Amos Rendao from APEX Movement in Colorado were in communication with Cooper. The initial idea was to host their APEX International competition at the FISE (Festival International des Sports Extrêmes) in Montpellier, France. FISE had forged partnerships with the International Federations of BMX, rollerblading and bouldering to host their official World Cups. FIG had no one competent to run their test parkour competition, so they wrangled APEX. Ryan and Amos were led to believe they were simply helping FIG and Mark Cooper hold an event, when in reality they were laying the foundations for parkour as a viable option for the 2020 Olympics as a new gymnastics discipline.

On February 24th, 2017, the news broke to the community with FIG's initial press release, which revealed their intentions. What followed was a tsunami of open letters to FIG from various parkour organisations, national governing bodies, communities, and individuals, all questioning their blatant misappropriation and encroachment, demanding they stand down. There was all-out bedlam across social media in the following months. People blotted out FIG's Instagram tagged feed with around 150 consecutive posts

with *WE ARE NOT GYMNASTICS* banners. Without knowing the full extent of what it could shape into, the community seemed to come together to extend a big "fuck you" to FIG. If FIG were unaware of how their unilateral encroachment would be received, they certainly knew now. However, they did not care in the slightest. They ploughed on with their plans for the Montpellier test event in May.

In an interview, FIG's secretary general André Gueisbuhler stated, "Parkour groups are not organised. Their spirit is to remain unorganised. But they want competition. I am convinced that the FIG is the most qualified international federation to develop Parkour."

He goes on to say, "Of course, we will not reinvent the wheel. We are working very closely with the founders of parkour."

(Spoiler alert: they tried to reinvent the wheel by introducing an objective scoring system, which was based on a rigid system unlike anything we'd seen in parkour before. We'll come to that later.) Since they had only spoken to Belle and Perrière by this point, I don't think they're in any position to gauge what the community *wants*. Not only because Belle and Perrière are extremely out of touch, but also because they are two people out of thousands of active parkourists. And suppose FIG are only taking heed from these two sell-outs, who have likely never watched a parkour competition, let alone organise one, and on top of that, in the past, they caused a majority of the community to be staunchly against competition. In that case, I don't think FIG is qualified at all, and we have as much chance of success in the Olympics if a badminton or yo-yo federation governed us. As for Belle, who had created years of anti-competition vitriol, in a Facebook post in May 2017, he suddenly seemed to change his tune. "The spirit of Parkour does not live in competition. From another angle, competition can also allow for self-improvement. Each has the right to follow their path. The spirit of Parkour is above all sharing, liberty, respect and tolerance of others."

Well, isn't that profound? Except it's too little, too late, David! Where was he spouting this *live and let live* sentiment ten years prior, when half the community were at the other half's necks? Call me crazy, but he developed this change of heart eerily close to the time he handed over parkour to FIG. Florian Busi, who was working with

The Mouvement, said in a Facebook comment thread, "At the start of this year, David Belle and Charles Perrière realised that to go further towards the recognition of Parkour, we would have to put a foot across the line that separated us from competition."

As for FIG's secretary general, André Gueisbuhler, saying we are wantonly unorganised, this ignores all prior competitions and, more importantly, deliberately turns a blind eye to the numerous national governing bodies that have rallied to oppose their hostile takeover. However, not all were ignored. Parkour UK's CEO, Eugene Minogue, received a reply from Gueisbuhler that attempted to justify their claims to the sport by peddling a half-arsed narrative of its so-called "historical ties" to gymnastics. They cited a cherry-picked passage from Julie Angel's book: "Like the original purpose of gymnastics, theirs was a social movement; their own philosophical, educational and personal revolutionary tool."

Let me remind you that gymnastics, as a revolutionary tool under the father of modern gymnastics, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, in nineteenth-century Germany, led to an early form of Nazism and the murder of the famous playwright, August von Kotzebue. Their revolution was one of heinous nationalist fervour that ended in gymnastics being outlawed for over twenty years. Gueisbuhler also went on to infer that Georges Hébert's Méthode Naturelle, in which parkour has its ideological roots, was originally a descendant of gymnastics due to Hérbert expressing in a letter to Pierre de Coubertin (the founder of the modern Olympic Games) how he took influence from an early contributor to gymnastics, Francisco Amorós. However, we know that Hébert drew inspiration from multiple sources to create his Natural Method. I think history tells us the scales are tipped more towards the Uruguayan and Colombian guerrilla fighters, the strong coal-mining women of Martinique, and, of course, the native Martiniquais saving themselves in the aftermath of one of the most cataclysmic volcanic eruptions in recorded history. After having her work cited at the detriment of the sport, Julie Angel responded in a letter arguing, "The work of Hébert also included the ability to throw, catch, swim and to fight, yet there has been no such encroachment by those sports or activities by FIG."

Even if we concede that parkour has loose ideological ties to Hébertism, Méthode Naturelle was a raw rejection of gymnastics rather than a descendant. Hébert's method was born of the recognition that gymnastics' methods of the time were ill-equipped and far too sterile and mollycoddled to develop any real practical physical capacity, regardless of how militaries adopted Francisco Amorós' ideas for tactical purposes. FIG's secretary general's letter also included old photos from the Joinville military school of gymnastics, demonstrating that in the early 1900s, gymnastics was used to teach soldiers to overcome urban obstacles, much like parkour. The images showed one man hanging from an eight-foot wall, supposedly after executing a wall run; a group of men haphazardly clambering over a wooden fence; and another navigating a six-foot-tall spiked fence, seemingly with great difficulty. The fact that Hébert's Natural Method and obstacle courses were adopted worldwide shows that his methods were favoured for utility within the military over gymnastics training. The letter's attempts to show that gymnastics did it first only came across as childish and insulting. FIG's secretary general was gaslighting with erroneous history revisionism.

Despite Gueisbuhler's best efforts to do his research for his little book report, he still didn't successfully prove any shared lineage with parkour. Not quite the *gotcha* he hoped for. He may as well have thrown in some cave paintings of prehistoric sapiens vaulting boulders to escape predation.

Parkour may draw from similar roots, but it was never a direct evolution of gymnastics. Moreover, gymnastics has clear connections with a wide range of physical activities and sports. Moving over obstacles is no more connected to gymnastics than it is to other athletic disciplines. Skateboarding, surfing, and skiing could easily employ the same historical arguments to claim dominion over snowboarding.

As I've argued, gymnastics' distinct lack of freedom – its rules, traditional form standards, and separate disciplines, each confined to minimal standardised apparatus and prescribed movements – is the defining difference between the two sports. The advent of parkour represents a necessary expansion to freedom. Parkour didn't come

from gymnastics, but it certainly filled a gap in human movement that needed filling. Parkour is the antithesis of gymnastics. Claiming that the antithesis to gymnastics comes from gymnastics is a laughable form of mental gymnastics. They do not have a leg to stand on with that argument. Parkour has borrowed from gymnastics, as it has from many other sports. They are still vastly different sports and cultures.

On the Movers Mindset podcast, Mark Toorock of American Parkour explains, "It is the wrong vehicle for parkour. The antithesis of parkour is pointing your toes, doing things for appearance, driving people to this point of unhealth, stress and dissatisfaction in life, and a competitive spirit that, the only parallel I can draw is beauty pageants for children. Where people get so fired up that they cake their children in make-up and scream at them."

Risks of Involvement

A whole roster of athletes had already been invited when Ryan Ford and Amos Rendao caught wind from various whistleblowers that crookedness was afoot. On May 13th 2017, APEX made the conscientious decision to withdraw two weeks before the event was scheduled to take place. Many of the invited athletes also stepped down and came together to issue their own open letter to FIG President Morinari Watanabe. The letter was signed by respected figures such as Joseph Henderson, Alyssa Serpa, Dylan Baker, Brodie Pawson, Renae Dambly, Luis Alkmim, Mich Todorovich, Lorena Abreu, Saskia Neville and more.

Unfortunately, APEX pulled out from FISE, only for the Netherlands' JUMP Freerun to swoop in and pick up where they left off. The first FIG competition took place in Montpellier, France, on May 29th, featuring a host of impressionable undesirables on the most basic, primitive speed course imaginable. Rather than a conventional prize pool, competitors were paid €1,500 for attending, with flights, hotels, and other expenses covered. Speed was the only event of the competition. The common standard for other speed courses at the time was designed to elicit a higher level of strategy, as the course's complexity would encourage a broader range of

decisions, making each run different and making the competition more competitive for the athletes and more entertaining for the audience. However, the course in Montpellier featured a few vault boxes littered between the event's skatepark ramps. It seemed that the inclusion of parkour at the event was a shoddy afterthought. Granted, it was their first event, and APEX had pulled out two weeks prior, leaving JUMP Freerun to cobble together whatever it could. However, when the results were posted on FIG's social media, the leaderboard listed each athlete as a gymnast. As you can imagine, following this first abomination, there was a resounding *we-told-you-so* from everyone else who had urged them to boycott the event.

The athletes who took part and posted selfies with David Belle suddenly became public enemy number one. There had been countless statements and videos warning of the potential implications. A full boycott at this stage would have done wonders. With no athletes, they had no event. Their competing for a quick buck gave this nefarious external federation power. These numbskulls either understood the gravity of the situation and still opted to turn a blind eye for an easy cash grab, because of a tiny talent pool, or they didn't understand the difference between competing at a private company's event, like Red Bull, and a powerful international federation's event, like FIG.

Now I know I've thrown a lot of information at you in this chapter so far, and I don't expect you to remember it all, but here's the brass tacks of the issue—so pay attention. To paraphrase René Scavington's anti-FIG video on Facebook, "FIG is a federation, not a company. Companies have limitations due to the competitive market in which they work. Federations are far more dangerous. A federation that has already developed infrastructure within the government is far more powerful."

The broader and more malevolent picture was not being seen. Parkour becoming recognised by the IOC and Sport Accord as a gymnastics discipline under FIG will grant them the power to assume control over our global grassroots industries. Due to their deeply intertwined ties to governments, they can set the standards our grassroots companies must comply with. They will not have to compete in the parkour market as we do in our grassroots. They won't

have to hold the best competitions, build the best parkour gyms and provide the best coaching certifications because, if they wanted to, they could OWN the parkour market!

All coaching certifications run by private companies would be viewed by insurers as inferior to FIG's purely because of their deep-rooted governmental ties and longstanding history as a federation. For countries without pre-established national federations, FIG will have the authority to block any financial opposition from doing business, as our grassroots have been doing independently for years. Gyms can lose access to subsidies and government funding if they're not associated with national gymnastics federations. In contrast, gymnastics national federations and gyms will acquire government funds through taxes and then use them without earning them, unlike a successful and responsible business. Parkour gyms relying on government subsidies could risk bankruptcy, effectively removing access to coaching for students and serving as a financial pathway for professionals, and destroying the central hub that many communities rely on.

The parkourists attending the events seemed wholly unaware that we risk being governed by an alien federation whose only intention is to capitalise on the new and popular sport on the block, as theirs is losing steam and thus IOC funding. If anyone should be at the helm of parkour, it is those who have been deeply embedded within it for a long time. And if anyone is to lead parkour into the Olympics, it should be those who are competent within our culture.

On July 12th 2017, Parkour Earth was formed, comprising six national federations. As I mentioned in the opening chapter, this was a rushed effort to create our international federation to steel ourselves against the impending threat. And what was the first order of business for this new international amalgamation of great minds? They combined their efforts and utilised their collective special superpower of writing cordially worded complaint letters. One big Megazord of a letter... which inevitably fell upon deaf ears, just like everyone else's futile attempts.

That said, at least they were correctly established as an international federation. IPF and FIADD had formed independently,

then reached out to other organisations to federate. FIG had already existed for over one hundred years, and they assumed they had the right to absorb our sport with the express permission of parkour's founders. In comparison, Parkour Earth was formed by six pre-existing national federations coming together to create a unified and democratic organisation. Federations from Australia, France, New Zealand, Poland, South Africa, the UK, and South Korea would each represent parkour in their countries, thereby insulating their industries from gymnastics' influence. Countries without these bodies in place will not be so lucky.

In all press releases and interviews, FIG claimed they would open their doors to the parkour community for their input, though it seemed their doors were firmly shut to any input that didn't aid their hostile takeover. They only welcomed those who would kiss the boot and be completely servile to their parasitic agenda. The IOC also buried its head in the sand, despite FIG's conduct violating its own regulations.

In August 2017, Parkour Earth's independent chair and British lawyer, Stuart McInnes, in a letter sent to FIG, the IOC, Sport Accord and the Court of Arbitration for Sport, demanded a meeting with FIG to recognise parkour's sovereignty. A meeting was agreed and scheduled for November 7th in Lausanne. Catching wind of the forthcoming meeting, Victor Bevine of IPF called foul on social media, accusing Parkour Earth of jumping into bed with the enemy. Yet the meeting reached no resolution. Subsequently, Parkour Earth threatened to take its dispute with FIG to the Court of Arbitration for Sport if a memorandum of understanding was not established within sixty days. However, even if they could somehow gather the tremendous funds to take them to court, as they weren't a formally recognised federation, they would need a mediation agreement from FIG, which they had no reason to give. Sure enough, the sixty days passed, and no memorandum of understanding was signed, and of course, nothing came of the empty threats.

Following Victor Bevine's false accusation of Parkour Earth jumping into bed with FIG, IPF jumped straight into bed with FIG, signing a memorandum of understanding with Morinari Watanabe on January 23rd 2018. The deal stated the two organisations will "work

together in mutual cooperation towards the possible successful inclusion of parkour into the Olympic programme under the aegis of the FIG."

Bevine claimed, "As long as we can be certain that parkour will remain autonomous, then it is obvious that the resources of the FIG offer tremendous benefits to parkour athletes and communities around the world."

In essence, he did precisely what he accused Parkour Earth of doing. He was simply furious when he thought they were going to get the position he wanted first, and then tried to spark drama on social media to turn the community against Parkour Earth. Off the back of this, in a Facebook comment thread, Julie Angel called out Ryan Doyle of IPF for being keen for FIG, to which Ryan erupted, "Am I fuck! How dare you?! WTF, Julie Angel, you are a gobshite! Who are ya? You do nothing except moan! If you ever call me out in a bullshit post again, I'll fly over there and slap ya with a SHANT! You're the worst kind of person, and we just don't want your help. Please, for the sake of the community... go away!"

A real popcorn moment... The in-fighting for alternate governance to FIG seemed to reach its boiling point, culminating with Ryan Doyle threatening to kick a middle-aged woman in the face with a tricking move. Still, as IPF's agreement with FIG was not legally binding, the partnerships soon fizzled out, and they were strewn aside. Despite levelling up their tactics beyond futile letter writing, any opposition to FIG's pilfering was swatted away with cold indifference.

FIG failed to secure parkour's inclusion in the Olympic programme for Tokyo 2020 at an IOC Executive Board meeting in June 2017. But that didn't stop them from hosting their November World Cup in Chengdu, China. They doubled down full steam ahead and set their sights on Paris 2024. Their competitions kept coming, and instead of vault boxes and skate ramps, they built a simplistic linear speed course, where two competitors would race side by side. They had now introduced Style as a category. In their Style format, for some reason, you had to demonstrate a backflip and a frontflip within your line to receive a good score. Their scores would be penalised if they

didn't interact with all key features of the course, which is a pretty arbitrary condition. Additionally, the judging criteria favoured excessively long lines over short, thought-out, and well-connected, unbroken sequences.

The Floodgates Open

In October 2018, after a year of involvement, four members of FIG's parkour commission resigned, including Ahmed Al-Breihi, Aleksandra Shevchenko, Estelle Piget, and Kamil Tobiasz. They issued an open letter to the parkour community, laying out their reasoning and their concerns, part of which read:

> "We are not aligned with the way that parkour is being implemented. The implementation is trying to go fast with very little or no transparency, no involvement from the international parkour community or national communities. Also, issues for Code of Points and "parkour equipment" that the parkour presidency wants don't reflect either our views or those of the parkour community. We see problems that worry us for the future of parkour."

Around the same time, David Belle also stepped down from his position as president of FIG's parkour commission, supposedly due to other professional commitments. But who knows, maybe deep down, the idea of selling off his baby to some thirsty, dead-eyed, bureaucratic, business-savvy leeches began to gnaw away at his conscience. Former Yamakasi member Charles Perrière swooped in to secure the position of president in Belle's stead. And according to an inside informant, who shall remain anonymous (Joseph Henderson), Perrière is doing a travesty of a job and using his entirely out-of-touch, archaic mindset to decide everything without effectively delegating to those who are more qualified.

More athletes began to cave under pressure when they saw other athletes throw caution to the wind and cash in on the opportunity. It

became increasingly difficult to stand by as FIG offered substantially larger cash prizes for its podium spots than any other competition. Their prize pools dwarfed even Red Bull Art Of Motion's. And unlike Red Bull at the time, FIG had separate podiums for men and women, with equal prize money. And it's not as if Red Bull couldn't afford it; they simply chose to blow their enormous budget on stunt helicopter halftime shows rather than supporting the competitors who make the competition.

Even those who had previously been very vocal in their opposition to FIG soon cowed to the power of los pesos and threw their hats in the ring. At one early event, Saskia Neville from the Netherlands, who had initially signed her name on the APEX International athletes' open letter, won nearly €10,000 by podiuming in both Speed and Style events. No disrespect to her skill level, but she made serious bank mainly because only about three other women were competing. All she had to do was show up to have a heavy chance of winning a life-changing amount of cash. Despite countless community members and organisations continuing to dissent against the encroachment, FIG had our talented parkourists in an armbar.

In April 2019, I heard rumours that some of my close friends from Storm Freerun were on the verge of succumbing to the pressure, so I decided to say my piece in Callum Tip no.400, which read:

> "Parkour competition, coaching, gyms and, above all, culture are in trouble when FIG are dangling €6000 carrots in front of athletes. There are many poor, easily corruptible athletes out there who know the chance of making the podium is very high, because anyone with REAL skill and class wouldn't dream of going for the low-hanging fruit and selling out their sport. But at least these athletes are involved with the FISE events and can steer the will of the entire International Olympic Committee, right? They'll listen for sure... And thank God we have the likes of David Nelmes to make sure they do things in the best interests of the entire parkour community... We all know who the real top contenders for Speed and Style are, and they deserve our full respect for not caving in to the pressure and taking part.

> It is fucking hard to make a living doing parkour, and I don't think enough people appreciate the sacrifice you guys are making by choosing not to take part and take these huge cash prizes. Hats off to you guys."

The battles waged in my comments section demonstrated that the opinions were now far more polarised than before. However, most people who chose to throw caution to the wind were still largely uninformed about the potential consequences.

The bowl-cut Russian, Archie Aroyan, who had recently taken gold in one of the World Cups, simply replied, "It's just a competition", which only further highlights the disregardful aloofness and general ignorance of some of those taking part. Most chose to compete and secure a hefty payday without sparing a heartbeat to research the risks, then played the confused, innocent victim when they faced any criticism.

Some people were baselessly optimistic, commenting that gymnastics could provide financial resources to underdeveloped countries to build parkour gyms for those who can't do so on their own. I think this is a very naive perspective. FIG isn't investing money in developing parkour for our community and industry; they are trying to save the sinking ship that is gymnastics by using parkour as their life raft. And in doing so, risk dragging the life raft down too. Even if they did decide to throw us a bone and build some gyms in underfunded states like Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Algeria and Iran, they would most likely be to an awful standard. Granted, something is certainly better than nothing, but more importantly, the money earned from these new gyms will line their pockets rather than boost parkour's struggling industry. Many responded to these thinly veiled, optimistic comments, saying the money would be reinvested in developing their gymnastics programs, gyms, events, and other disciplines. Parkour Earth's then CEO, Damien Puddle, has said they have already been acquiring local funding by leveraging parkour's popularity and investing it in gymnastics equipment rather than parkour programs. And, quite likely, any money they receive will go towards subsuming other sports, such as obstacle course racing and

pole dancing, or anything that President Watanabe can get his greedy mitts on.

That money would also go to paying the wages of their serial child molester staff, like the USA Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar. This was the biggest sexual abuse scandal in sports history, with hundreds, some even estimate thousands, of victims, including Simone Biles and McKayla Maroney. This far surpasses the cases of Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein. Yes, Nassar has been behind bars since 2017, serving a 175-year sentence, but this highly publicised case – even with its own Netflix documentary, *Athlete A* – is far from an isolated occurrence.

John Geddert, a former USA Gymnastics head coach and friend of Nassar, was accused of human trafficking of minors, sexual misconduct with minors and forced labour, among other crimes. Hours after he was charged, he took his own life. They were freely able to get away with abusing so many gymnasts for years. USA Gymnastics systematically suppresses and dismisses its athletes' complaints of abuse for the sake of its reputation and future medals. Complaints were made about Nassar as far back as 1998, and they were downplayed or ignored entirely. Gymnasts refrained from rocking the boat out of fear of ostracisation or removal from teams. When they spoke out, they were blackballed in the sport. USA Gymnastics' abhorrent conduct is almost indistinguishable from that of the Catholic Church and the BBC. The two vile predators were eventually brought to justice, but the damage had been done. Many lives are already crushed by trauma and shame after growing up with sexual abuse from the odious men who were supposed to help them do the sport they loved. There is no telling how many sick and depraved predators are still amongst the gymnastics staff ranks. Joan Ryan, author of the 1995 book *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, commented on the Nassar case, "There is no other sport in which this could have happened but gymnastics. These girls are groomed from an incredibly young age to deny their own experience. Your knee hurts? You're being lazy. You're hungry? No, you're fat and greedy. They are trained to doubt their own feelings, and that's why this could happen to over 150 of them."

This is not only what parkour under FIG will help fund; it's also what we risk inviting into our culture. It's not only sexual abuse that makes gymnastics institutions a toxic culture. As Joan Ryan alluded to, long-lasting eating disorders and body dysmorphia are common worldwide in the sport.

Coming back to the comments on my post. People opined that at least the parkourists involved will have an impact on where they are steering things and keep gymnastics on track. The handful of opportunists who think they know what's best for the international community are outright arrogant. And also naive to think that FIG will listen where it counts. FIG had made it clear on numerous occasions that they were not interested in listening to us, as evidenced by their repeated disregard for open letters and their evasive responses to key questions and concerns. As mentioned, four of their parkour commission members stepped down due to a lack of transparency. If the parkourists on their commission can't make adequate changes on behalf of the community, then who can?

A few who had attended events commented along the lines of "the FIG organisers were really nice and were listening to our concerns, and the vibe of the whole event was really good."

Yes, of course, they're going to make it feel like that. They're trying to butter them up, so they keep coming back and go on to spread the word that it's all sunshine and rainbows. Also, the vibe is undoubtedly going to feel good. They've given them a free holiday to do parkour with their friends, with enormous cash prizes! Would they only be concerned if all the organisers had devil horns on their heads, scorning everyone in their wake and cackling maniacally while throwing wads of cash up in the air, while snorting coke off a prostitute's chest between sips from goblets filled with the blood of the innocent? Would that be the only worthy red flag to pierce through the haze of their fun-filled, all-expenses-paid holiday?!

Many of the people commenting were upset with how I was criticising people's skill levels and singling out David Nelmes. To be fair, the growing roster of athletes at the more recent events, which preceded my post, was undoubtedly better than at the first events in 2017. The unflattering comparison between the competitors and the

boycotters held less water. As for singling out old David Nelmes, I'm sure if you're this far into reading this book, you'll know by now that I'm certainly not above publicly roasting individuals. However, I have since apologised to Nelmes and told him I wouldn't have singled him out if I thought he couldn't take a joke from a friend on the chin like a champ. (The same cannot be said for everyone in this book. Sorry, not sorry!) But honestly, would you elect David Nelmes to make decisions on the future of our sport? Would you?!

A thread of comments was started by JUMP Freerun's CEO, Mark Van Sweiten, the man in cahoots with FIG who had provided their courses. His point, in essence, was that everyone's fears about gymnastics' domination were unsubstantiated, and rather than posting spiteful Instagram captions and stoking divisive arguments, I should simply call him and hear his inside interpretation of events in full detail. To which I replied:

> "If you're privy to inside information, you owe it to the concerned community, who are in the dark, to post and share information that will alleviate everyone's worries. At the moment, there is no transparency, and from the outside, it just seems like a secret society of peeps having a sick holiday with cash prizes at the expense of the future of the parkour community."

No replies from Van Sweiten followed, or public posts as far as I'm aware, and everyone on the other side of the closed curtain continued to be left to their own devices. Those involved with an undeniable vested interest, such as Van Sweiten, the judges, their parkour commission or any competitors, are unlikely to shine any light on any duplicity or ineptitude, because they don't want to bite the hand that feeds them. And, as you'll read later, even nibbling at the hand can result in excommunication, not only from their jobs, but from the entire local community where gymnastics has become the dominant structure.

Amid this debate, the fact remained that arguments on both sides were frustratingly based on predictions. No one had any idea yet what would happen or what FIG would do. What it ultimately came

down to was that one side of the fence was shouting, " Fuck you! Don't take my stuff!" And the other replying, "Fuck you! Don't take my stuff!" On the Storror Podcast, Harrison Gabriel compared the early FIG panic to the rabid disarray of the early COVID-19 chaos, where wild and fearful speculations were screamed from the rooftops, tinged with virtue signalling. All any of us could realistically do was try to glean insight from numerous examples of how sports federations had done the same to other, less developed sports. This corrupt, unilateral lunge for control is already prevalent in the sporting world surrounding the Olympics. The IOC first required all Olympic sports to be governed by a recognised international body in 1920. Since then, existing federations have had tremendous control over organised sport. Whenever a new, popular sport emerged, it was much easier and quicker for an existing federation to claim ownership than for a new federation to form organically.

The ski federation usurped the newer sport, snowboarding. And if you know skiing and snowboarding at all, you'll know their history is a prickly one. To the dismay of many snowboarders, the skiing federation carted out a snowboarding certification that skiers quickly jumped on. In the 90s and early 00s, snowboarding was one of the fastest-growing sports in the world, but its industry and participation have seen a steady decline since it was included in the Olympics, prompting some industry leaders to ask, "Is snowboarding dead?" The outlaw image of snowboarding that attracted many in the 90s has been declining since then, but aligning with the IOC under skiing – practically the epitome of the buttoned-up establishment – has no doubt left the most considerable dent.

The cycling federation, UCI, absorbed BMX freestyle, even though BMX already had its own federation, IBMXFF. This federation was formed by the world's leading BMX freestyle riders, with the world-famous Mat Hoffman as its president. In 2018, Hoffman said that while working with UCI and the IOC for the past fifteen years, he and other leading riders were repeatedly "shut out for upholding our vow to our sport to protect the uniqueness we have built and cherish."

More recently, the federation for pentathlon, UIMP, has declared itself the sole international governing body for obstacle

course racing and ninja sports, despite these sports already having World Obstacle as an umbrella federation.

The international federations of surfing and canoeing had to squabble in court over who governs stand-up paddle-boarding. Can you picture a courtroom of old squares in suits arguing that "Stand-up paddle-boarding is closest to surfing because it's a board!" And the other side rebutting, "Objection, your honour! It's closer to canoeing because of the paddle! Suck these nuts, you Kelly Slater glazing hippie!"

As the IOC seeks to incorporate more action sports into its bureaucratic structures to build its audience and attract corporate sponsors, the axes of power are shifting. Not only are industry leaders like Mat Hoffman pushed out from decision-making that affects their sports' image and ethos, but the downstream effects threaten their businesses. This gross, financially motivated land grab in sports may be widespread, but that certainly doesn't make it ethical. Independently developing an industry into something successful for some Goliath to come along and say, "We'll be having that" is wildly immoral in principle.

Despite all the conjecture from both sides of the argument, I thought it remained selfish and careless to roll the dice with so much at stake.

However, my guard eventually lowered slightly, and I was rendered more apathetic toward the whole thing when my longtime close friend, Joseph Henderson, from Storm Freerun, shared his piece in a comment on my post.

> "Easy to wait when you're in an incredibly privileged position and don't have a stake in the game. As one of the very few current paths for athletes to make any real living from parkour, these competitions are far too great an opportunity to be taken lightly, and the validity of the arguments against involvement should be considered with the utmost seriousness. There is a potential for negative consequences in every choice the people in our sport with influence make. Many of the same bureaucrats and 'parkour

> intellectuals' spearheading the anti-FIG campaign would also criticise Roof Culture and the general commercialisation of parkour. I understand that having something to loudly rebel against can be fun and somewhat elevate one's sense of self-importance, but my belief that tacitly supporting the FIG as the *be-all, end-all* of potentially harmful actions has been waning massively. And I say this, being totally aware that my voice has been perhaps one of the loudest and certainly most primary in urging athletes to seriously consider the implications of involvement before agreeing to compete. While FIG may do a crap job of running competitions, I am firm now in my belief that our culture is far too strong and embedded to be changed by an external body. If they provide the opportunity for athletes to sustain their lifestyle and grant them the finances needed to be able to keep pushing their ability through training, pushing our culture to greater heights by creating videos and clothing, and pushing grassroots events and competitions by flying themselves to jam and compete—then I'm happy for them."

As we know, making a living doing parkour is a challenging endeavour. For some, it's easier to just say no to the opportunity to win the enormous prize money they are offering. In a *Parkour Entrepreneur* article, Jacob Cormier interviews FIG contestants to hear their perspectives. Valentine Dubois explains:

> "I am there first and foremost for my own interest and because I want to become World Champion. That's it. I'm not shying away from it. I'm not scared of being judged for it. I'm fully aware of why I am there, and I'm not going to play the ostrich by saying it's for something else. If you are in the top three, you get a lot of money. We're talking about €6,000 for first place, €4,000 for second place and €2,500 for third place. That's a lot of money for someone like me, who lives with my mom. I survive on social welfare and occasional parkour jobs. Having this opportunity is a big plus for me since I dedicated my life to training."

Hold up! Social welfare? This is the guy who claimed to have spent a total of €4000 on a trip to Thailand to train with Ido Portal... Valentine goes on to say that everything in the past that has received pushback from the community tends to gain acceptance and become generally tacitly accepted globally after a few years. He expected the same would eventually happen with FIG, so amid the original controversy of 2017, he thought, "Okay, put me in, I don't care about what anyone is saying, I don't care about the judgments. I am an athlete. I want to compete. I want to become a World Champion. That's my goal. I want to go to this event. It's just going to be a plus for me."

While Valentine seems to consistently present himself as a great case study for how parkour competition can become pathological for one's well-being and feelings of self-worth, you have to admire the man's honesty.

Some people are already in very fortunate financial positions, whether due to generational wealth, hard work, or simply being in the right place at the right time. It's easy to dissent against FIG when you're already on a comfy day rate working in stunts, as some vocal boycotters were. It's easy to be loud on social media when you have no real talent and work in sustainable jobs outside of parkour. I quit my job and committed to pursuing parkour, through thick and thin, for years before making any consistent income. As I've said, Sacha and I have been through periods when we were young, without a tenner between us or any financial safety net and had to steal food to eat. (And food for our flea-ridden cat, Mimi.) The chances are that, if the opportunity had arisen to compete in FIG's World Cups in those desperate times, it would have been incredibly hard to turn down.

Joseph Henderson, Tim Champion, and Ed Scott from Storm Freerun are among the best in the world. They dominated multiple non-FIG competitions, including SPL, and earned numerous medals. They were doing their best to make parkour their livelihood as their Storm predecessors had. Storm was winding down as a company, with YouTube views and clothing sales dwindling, and their leader, Kie Willis, seemed pessimistic about the prospect of maintaining a stable living in the sport, to the point where he redirected his energies

into drone piloting instead. Seeing this deep pessimism from the man running the show can't have ignited too much hope in the brand's future for the boys. In their early years, getting brought onto Storm was seen as a huge badge of honour and a guaranteed pathway to consistent professional work. When Tim, Ed and Joe were added to their roster, each with their special announcement video featuring the *super cool* symbolic black masks, they must have felt like made men with a bright future ahead of them. However, when things took a downturn, one of the more reliable avenues for income became competition. Although their situation at the time was far from impoverished, I still respected their decision to compete at Montpellier the following month.

Although... I couldn't help feeling a bit embarrassed for them when they returned home empty-handed. Joseph came 8th in Speed, Tim came 6th in Speed, and Ed came 6th in freestyle. Tim also had a bar snap off underneath him whilst practising on their sham of a course. (Although that also happened to him at SPL in 2024. Maybe it's not so much the course, and more that Tim is just too damn hench.) Not only were they up against top-tier athletes, but they also competed against those with far more experience on their template speed courses and who knew how to game their bogus Style judging system. The Storm boys did not return to the event.

But all this aside, more and more respected parkourists soon succumbed to the pressure, and it became less of a taboo. The floodgates had opened, and we, collectively, though most of us tacitly, invited the potential domination of our industry, public image, and culture. In 2021, when I first began writing this chapter, their database listed 210 parkour gymnasts. In 2025, there are 601.

Chapter 16 - The Takeover in Full Swing

In December 2020, the IOC denied parkour's inclusion in the 2024 Paris Olympics. However, it was not written off entirely. In a press conference with the IOC, their sports director said:

> "The only way that parkour could have been added was if it replaced existing gymnastic events. And because of the short turnaround time between now and 2024, the gymnastics federation chose not to propose replacing any of the existing events with parkour. So it wasn't a matter of us rejecting parkour."

The 2020 World Championships, as proposed in FIG's original roadmap, were postponed to 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With regional qualifier events run by gymnastics national federations and a regular World Cup series, their competition circuit was now in full swing, and all of it was leading to their first 2022 World Championships in Tokyo.

The Anomalous Effects of Sportisation

In August 2022, FIG's Table of Tricks from their Code of Points was shared across social media, causing bemusement among the community. This was the first time FIG's parkour judging system was available for public scrutiny. Even at first glance, there were some glaring issues. The first and most prominent point of contention is that they had endeavoured to create an objective scoring system in the first place. Each trick and move on the table had been assigned between zero and five points, and there was no mention of where or how that trick was performed.

In the Olympics, many events have transitioned to more objective scoring systems to promote fairness, impartiality and consistency. Still, some degree of subjective judgment remains

unavoidable in certain sports, such as diving, breaking, dressage, artistic swimming, figure skating, and even rhythmic and artistic gymnastics. However, even in these sports, ongoing efforts are being made to transition to more objective frameworks. When the IOC took on kiteboarding, they were presented with a variety of their more popular freestyle events, such as freestyle, wave riding, kicker/slider. Still, they instead opted for the far less popular racing events, purely because they can say the first one across the line wins. It seems that, with parkour, FIG has attempted to come straight out of the gate with a haphazard objective format rather than starting more subjectively and going through the arduous process of refinement.

A trick-based, objective scoring system creates a major problem for a sport that relies on artistry and interacting with obstacles. In any environment-based sport, how and where a move is performed is critical. Where a move is performed is just as important, and in many cases, far more important than merely the move being performed. In FIG's Table of Tricks, there is a category labelled "parkour classics", where the examples provided are tic-tacs and turn vaults. I'm assuming jumps and other vaults come under that category, too. For men, parkour classics, such as handsprings, basic flips and baby giants all score zero points. It should be easy for anyone who understands parkour to see how this might be an issue. A large and daring jump scores zero because it's just a jump. A side flip precision to a rail scores zero because it's just a basic flip with a *classic parkour* precision. It would also discourage all creative ways a competitor might usually engage with a course. But, as the only judging criteria are difficulty and execution, perhaps they have forgotten altogether that creativity is a vital aspect of parkour. An easy mistake to make, I suppose...

Suppose a judging system overlooks obstacle interaction as a key factor in how the sport is measured. In that case, competitors will focus solely on landing difficult prescribed tricks on their standardised and unchanging course, consisting of platforms, slanted walls, and bars of varying heights, creating something similar to... You guessed it, gymnastics! FIG are trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Parkour, as an environment-based sport, cannot be reduced to an objective scoring system based on a table of prescribed tricks.

Creating a fully functional, objective scoring system that accounts for all the ways a bottomless well of tricks can be applied to a Style course is impossible, even if it is the same boring course each time.

A subtle remark beneath the table of tricks reads, "Moves performed out of the longitudinal plane in slanted axis are decreased by a value of 0.5 points (example: corks, slanted backflips, b-twists), excluding double (pistol) frisbee." This stoked controversy on Instagram. It's yet another arbitrary rule that squashes creativity, diverse individuality, and styles that don't align with gymnastics' rigid, sanitised ideals—limiting freedom of expression under a regime of tradition entirely alien to parkour's history, culture, and values. (At least Alfred Scott will be pleased that there'll be no slanted kong gainers.)

Another feature in the Code of Points regarded the length of lines. It states, "The minimum time of the freestyle run is 20 seconds. If an athlete finishes the run before that, a deduction of 2 points will be taken from the total score."

Points would be rewarded for longer lines up to a maximum of seventy seconds. A line lasting between fifty-nine and seventy seconds would score an extra two points. This is another dramatic misrepresentation of how the sport is practised at large. Twenty seconds is more often the maximum length of a line than the minimum. Incentivising competitors to go all out for over a minute is not only unnatural for the sport but also borderline cruel.

We've had parkour competitions since the first Red Bull Art Of Motion in 2007, and our community has been tinkering, experimenting and refining their formats. Today's competition organisers stand on the shoulders of giants; they have learnt from previous successes and failures, whittling down to what consistently works for fairness, spectator entertainment, competitors' enjoyment, and closer representation of how the sport is practised at large. FIG seems to turn a blind eye to all of that, even disregarding the formats of other environment-based sports predating parkour, and has endeavoured to sloppily reinvent the wheel, in doing so, pigeonholing parkourists and stifling creativity and individuality. Instead of representing how it's widely practised, they give birth to a new, coerced, inauthentic and sterile branch of parkour. FIG would have

had a better chance of borrowing the competition format from Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2 than implementing the travesty they conjured up from thin air.

One other small detail on the execution side of the Code of Points was the "Reference List for Connection". Competitors would be rewarded up to two points for connecting more moves. A seemingly small detail that was overshadowed in the online critiques due to the objective nature of the difficulty judging. On paper, it seems like a good thing to reward. Their head judge, Nicolas Fischer, told me that the idea was to reward "translational connections", where athletes can display mastery by directly linking moves with pop connections (plyometric-driven connections), like what you would see in a Sport Parkour League combo round. However, I highly doubt this was the initial intention, given how connections were scored: 0.5 points for 5 to 8 linked moves, up to 2 points for 17 to 20 linked moves. It is ridiculous to assume anyone will plyometrically link 20 moves consecutively, even for the likes of the spring-loaded George McGowan.

In October 2022, when the videos of the World Championships surfaced on Instagram, it was painstakingly obvious that the competitors had exploited this feature, and connections became a jarring, defining feature of the lines that scored the highest.

Greece's Dimitris Kyrsanidis (DK) was crowned the first FIG World Champion in men's Style in Tokyo. His exceptionally long and meandering line featured only three unexceptional and commonplace moves: double side, double flyaway, and back double full, and the rest was padded out with unexceptional vaults and embarrassingly unimaginative floor moves. But it was all "connected". Forward rolls, didi rolls, cartwheels, coffee grinders, palm spins and ground kongs connected all vaults and big tricks, to the point where he barely took a step in his line. Many others exploited the connection loophole with equally jarring lines that were far from representative of what they would usually string together for a comp line. The faulty judging system had coerced them into setting aside their individual style and conforming to whatever scored highest. The lines were lambasted and joked about online, though they are hardly the competitors' fault; it's their duty to understand the rules of the game if they wish to win. It

is the organisers' fault for creating a system so specific and constrained that it made the lines that were chastised en masse.

Elis Torhall, however, who is usually a crowd favourite with numerous wins under his belt in a variety of competitions, did not compromise in the slightest. He performed his line with the same unadulterated and unbridled fury as he would at any other competition, stomping his usual show-stopping tricks, and, shock horror, running between moves instead of ground kongs, cartwheels and rolling around on the floor. When comparing DK's run to Elis's, it's as clear as day who should have landed in first place. Still, under FIG's system, the Greeks' roly-polies and cartwheels came out on top, and he returned at Thessaloniki airport to a horde of local press, family and friends greeting him with applause and flowers.

Following this travesty, Kipa Magazine shared an interview with head judge Nicolas Fischer, who had developed the judging system, where he explains:

> "FIG was recruiting for a new parkour commission. I applied for the commission because I wanted to get more insight into how everything was done. I ended up making it in, and soon I was in a meeting with the rest of the committee. As we were dividing the duties at the first meeting, I knew there was no way I wanted to be responsible for judging. I had judged some smaller competitions before, but for me, parkour is all about creating and having fun, rather than being scored by anything. However, since I am not the kind of guy who raises my hand, one topic was left at the end of the day: judging, and one guy didn't have a duty yet, which was me. That's how I ended up getting the position of head judge."

To summarise, just so that we're on the same page, Nicolas was appointed head judge for a world sports organisation because he showed up to a meeting and sat quietly in a corner. Instead of being voted in or going through a rigorous hiring process, the vital role fell into his lap, and instead of expressing how he may not be the most

qualified for the position, he just ran with it. In the interview, he goes on to say how, after the World Championships, they knew straight away that the connections bug needed fixing, but "the challenge is that the code of points is usually done by the Olympic cycle, every fourth year, and it needs to be approved by the EC. (Executive Committee)"

So, not only has a horrifically under-qualified person pulled an objective judging system out of a hat rather than build on the hundreds of competitions in the past, but they are also locked into the same crummy format for four years. The Sport Parkour League can identify minor bugs in each annual competition it runs and promptly rectifies them with mock competitions in its gyms, ensuring improvements for the following year. René Scavington and Tom Coppola are competition-organising veterans and understand the need to make small changes as they go. However, the larger the organisation, the more bureaucracy there is, and the slower progress is made. FIG is unable to tinker, chop, and change as they go because each alteration, significant or minor, must go through a lengthy chain of command, all the way up to the executive committee and President Morinari Watanabe, and be clearly communicated and implemented across all smaller national federations for their regional events. And then, once the new changes are in place and ready to go for the next Olympic cycle, there's no guarantee they won't find they have another loophole that competitors are incentivised to exploit, which shows up in lines as another strange anomaly. And of course, they'll have to endure four more years of shit competitions until they can rejig again in the next cycle.

Suppose the connection-heavy 2022 World Championships were broadcast worldwide at the Olympics. This abomination would undoubtedly shape public perception of our sport. If any of you reading this believe we, as a community, worry far too much about our public image, let me remind you of what happened to rollerblading. Aggressive inline skating had a strong culture and a vast industry in the 90s and early 2000s, ranking among the fastest-growing sports in the world, despite skateboarders consistently attempting to tarnish its image. Many attribute a massive crash in inline's popularity to one widespread homophobic joke: "What is the

hardest thing about rollerblading?—Telling your parents you're gay." Imagine skateboarders rolling up to an innocent rollerblader who's minding his own business, lathering up a coping at the skatepark with far too much wax, and maliciously dropping that joke. And the poor, homophobic rollerblader's masculinity is so shaken that he decides to bin his blades. In the mid-2000s, participation declined, sales dropped, events lacked funding, and the sport was pulled from the X Games. Whether it was this cheap-shot joke alone or the widespread smear campaign by skateboarders, rollerblading's decline is a notable example of how sports, their industries, and cultures are fragile in the face of public perception.

The Office skit from 2009 is a prime example for us. I've heard many stories from parkourists about being bullied in school for doing parkour. The prevalence of the HARDCORE PARKOUR skit certainly has played a hand in that. We have toiled since then to pull ourselves out of this trench. If the 2022 World Championships had been broadcast to the world in the Olympics, I don't doubt that parkour would have been kicked deeper into the trench.

When speaking with climber Pete Whittaker about climbing's Olympic debut at the 2021 games, I brought up the mess of grouping climbers from three separate disciplines—lead, bouldering, and speed climbing—into a single medal event. (This is akin to expecting track athletes to run 100 and 1,500 metres for the same medal.) He replied that climbers found it odd and an egregious misrepresentation, as they are all vastly different specialisations, but to the general public watching at home, it probably looked cool enough. In my view, so long as parkour crosses that *cool enough* threshold, the public image won't be affected too negatively, and will only have a positive effect, as it has for climbing. However, the state of FIG competitions in 2022, and any other potential anomalous misrepresentations that may occur in the future, could cause parkour to fall short of that threshold and appear as something exceedingly lame.

Considering our public image is an essential factor in the growth or decline in participation of our sport, and the participation in our sport is directly linked to how much money is circulating through our community's economy, thus supporting our grassroots companies and top athletes, we would do well as a community to try

to maintain a good public image. And those making decisions behind the curtain at FIG are on track to do more harm than good.

For anyone creating a judging system, it's imperative to understand how what you set out to incentivise may be exploited. And perhaps more importantly, if what you incentivise is too narrow and objective, you risk squashing an open, varied and expressive sport and art form into a narrow and claustrophobic box, devoid of individuality, uniqueness, creativity and freedom. As mentioned in Chapter 14, we've seen how FIG's Style judging has moulded competitors' line choices into a constrained and predictable funnel, also influencing lines in other competitions and how parkourists train in gyms and on the streets. I mentioned how Style at the SPL European qualifiers at Hal5 was a monotonous, repetitive swing-cast fest, where competitors brought their FIG line-building mindset to a competition format that highly rewards course interaction. Competitors gravitated toward platform, high-bar, and slanted-wall tricks, entirely ignoring the vast opportunities the diverse obstacles and unique shapes the incredible gym offered. FIG athletes seem to lack the vision to incorporate moves into complex spaces; instead, they gravitate toward the ubiquitous gym features and perform their dialled moves on them. Judging systems that place too much importance on objective difficulty, whilst placing little to no importance on how the movements are performed with the environment, create a competitive base of parkourists who will solely train to dial in their doubles and triples on the high bars, slanted walls and platforms that they can count on being available on the unchanging FIG Style course. What they reward is what they will train, and this will only result in a conveyor belt of unimaginative clones. You may not recognise the influence of this too much in your favourite parkourists on your Instagram feed, but that doesn't mean the effects aren't widespread. This isn't just for those at the top of the World Cup leaderboards; parkourists are training like this for all smaller national and regional competitions worldwide, and FIG's influence has a significantly larger hold on smaller communities in poorer countries where the high prize money is more meaningful. This is precisely how a free and expressive sport becomes as sanitised and constrained as gymnastics.

None of this is to say that what we're seeing today at FIG competitions is not impressive. Incentivising progressively bigger tricks above all else undoubtedly fosters progress. Flyaway full in back outs and triple flyaways have become commonplace moves at these competitions, and despite them first being executed outside of competition by a small handful of parkourists, FIG's competitions have certainly accelerated the community's progress with them and other high-level tricks. And not only are these once inconceivable tricks becoming the norm to see in competition, but they're also being performed within extraordinarily long lines. Before FIG competitions, you would never see a line lasting around a minute whilst also being jam-packed with some of the hardest tricks in the sport. Some of the older Red Bull Art Of Motion lines were strung out to a minute, but they were all too often stretched out by gesturing to the crowd, which in effect served as little rest periods between moves. Modern competition lines involve constant motion, with no moment wasted, and FIG lines push this to an extraordinary level, demanding a great deal from competitors. Because FIG's judging system rewards long lines, competitors train for them. We see far more athletes training for cardio and lactic threshold work than ever before, as FIG invests heavily in its prize pools. They will mould themselves to wherever the money leads them. Overall, it can create something that is in and of itself exceptionally impressive and far beyond what has previously been conceivable. However, at the same time, as with gymnastics, progress can only be funnelled into a narrow, predictable chokepoint. It pushes parkour's progress vertically—progressively bigger and better—rather than horizontally into new, innovative fields.

In 2023, I reshared Elis Torhall's phenomenal qualifying line from the first SPL European qualifiers. He opened with a perfectly stomped double swing cast, followed by a tac 180 to speed step, straight into a wall inward side, and finished with a perfectly connected flyaway to a perpendicular rail precision, bouncing back into a lache precision with a snappy punch Rudi out. All moves were aggressively and elastically linked together, using far more of the unique course's features than the FIG athletes in the more recent SPL European qualifiers described above.

Luis Alkmim replied to my story post, "Robot. As much style as a door."

To which I replied, "If you say so. I think that's a very narrow way to look at style, though. This run 100% has style, regardless of whether it appeals to yours or anyone else's taste."

As I've said before, style is almost unavoidable; everybody's movement has a particular style, whether intentional or not. What Luis seems to be referring to is a lack of something he considers higher than the pure difficulty of the movement.

Luis explains, "I looped it a few times because I appreciate the difficulty, but I can't see beauty. It's like very virtuous jazz: much tech, no groove. But it's my eyes, and it applies to pretty much every Style run I see nowadays. How can you differentiate this from high-level sketchy gymnastics?"

This final sentence got my goat, and I replied, "So, the difference is, it is parkour... The fact that it verges closely in some regards, in terms of a select few moves, doesn't make it gymnastics. The fact that it is forming a creative line interacting with an environment that isn't a set and standardised course or singular apparatus is more than enough of a difference. The amount of hard acrobatics he does has nothing to do with it. The level of course integration that Elis uses in this run is high— meaning it's not just platform or high-bar tricks sloppily linked together with Didi rolls. It's disappointing to hear you making the same line of argument that FIG have used to seize parkour for their own."

It felt odd defending such a perfectly crafted and executed line with top-tier difficulty. The progression of difficulty is undoubtedly something we value as a community, regardless of how closely the moves may be associated with sports we've borrowed from. We applaud leaps in vertical progress as well as horizontal innovative progress. They both expand the boundaries of what humans are capable of. There can be just as much character, heart and soul in movement that is more difficult than it comes off as artistic, expressive or innovative. However, there may be a tipping point at which incentives can begin to blur the lines and siphon out the character, heart, and soul from people's movement.

Mexico's Ella Bucio is an exceptional athlete who is regularly seen atop the FIG podiums in both Style and Speed. Her Instagram bio boasts six gold medals, five silver medals, two bronze medals, and eight gold medals in national events. Like Ed Scott, Tim Champion, Luke Albrecht and Aleksandra Shevchenko, she is a prime example of how an ex-gymnast can seamlessly assimilate into parkour and accelerate to becoming an established household name, both in and outside of competition. I've heard a few people criticise her FIG lines, saying she is merely a gymnast who is simply showing up and securing a hefty payday. But this is entirely false. She has trained parkour for around a decade, and a majority of her skills appear to have been honed during that time, including a high level of the more traditional parkour skills. If she were a gymnast who had made a quick switch to parkour for easy money, there is no way she would also be able to be so successful in FIG's Speed category. It is such a tired trope in our community, assuming women to be gymnasts based on how well they move and thus discrediting their efforts. However, if all you see is her FIG Style lines, it's easier to see where her critics are coming from.

Ella's run at the 2024 FIG World Cup in Portugal began with a mind-blowing flyaway full in back out. She slightly overcooks the rotation into a near-seamless back roll and continues her momentum with a back handspring, straight to a forward handspring, into a wall flip on a slanted wall. She then laboriously vaults her way back to the same high bar she started on, kips up, and casts out into a giant for a double flyaway. Again, she overcooks the rotation into a back roll and another back handspring, squeezes out a couple more speed steps on the low bars until she, yet again, jumps up onto the same high bar, casts into a giant for yet another double flyaway, this time coming out in a perfect gymnastics-esque forward roll before standing up and presenting arms raised overhead like a gymnast.

First of all, to give her her flowers, the difficulty of the three high bar moves is more than worthy of respect, especially starting with the full in. Three big high-bar moves in one competition line is unheard of. However, at the same time, three big high-bar moves in one competition line is unheard of! In essence, it was a high-bar routine with hard ground, broken up by sneaking in some

handsprings and rudimentary vaults as filler. It's incredibly hard to imagine that this would be a choice outside of a FIG competition. One comment on her Instagram post read, "I don't know much about gymnastics, but this looks absolutely impressive." Another commented, "All good, but they forgot what sport they play." And, "Damn gymnasts! Don't come steal medals!"

Again, Ella Bucio is a parkourist through and through, and an exceptionally talented one at that, but her haphazard, poorly composed line got me thinking like Luis Alkmim. It blurred the lines between parkour and sketchy gymnastics. If Luis didn't jibe with Elis's SPL qualifiers line, he'd likely shit a brick seeing Ella's.

Still, despite what some may have erroneously assumed, there hadn't been any ex-gymnasts converting to parkour like a duck to water for easy medals at FIG World Cups. That was at least until the very next 2024 World Cup in Japan, where Shang Chunsong won gold in women's Style. As is often the case with elite female gymnasts, Shang appears to be 14 years old, yet is actually 29. No joke, she is tiny! According to Gymnastics Wikia, Shang was raised in poverty in rural China. Conditions were so poor that she was malnourished from a young age, which led to her being short in stature even as she grew up. She took up gymnastics in 2003 in Hunan Province, China, made the national team in 2010, and went on to win a bronze medal on the uneven bars at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Her bio on the FIG website states, "She has a brother who has a visual impairment. Her biggest hope is to earn enough money to cure her brother's eyesight."

Elite gymnastics is fiercely competitive, and once they age out or show any signs of being unable to keep up, they are often dropped from the team or receive fewer resources. Shang flip-flopped in and out of retirement from 2017 to 2021, and finally, in 2022, made the switch to parkour. She made her parkour debut at FISE Montpellier in May 2024, where she, like Ella Bucio, nailed three high-bar moves in one line: double full, full in back out, and double flyaway. The flyaway full in may have been a world's first by a woman in a parkour competition, yet in her 2016 Rio Olympics uneven bars routine, she finished dismounting with a full in full out.

Shang's winning line at the World Cup in Japan began with the most quintessential gymnast set-up for a tsukahara, followed by

making a desperate break, running for the closest high-bar in sight, where she clambers up the side rungs to the bar (because she's too short to jump up to it, bless her heart), kips up, casts into a giant and dismounts in a beautifully landed full in back out. Shang then scampers over to a slant wall for a quick wall spin detour, before, you guessed it, climbing back up the rungs to the same bar, and finishes with another giant into double flyaway.

My point in all this is not that we should gate-keep parkour so that gymnasts don't steal medals; my point is that we should not have a judging system that makes it so that a retired athlete, who's been spat out the other end of a different sport, can easily swoop in and clean up. It shouldn't happen, and wouldn't happen in other parkour competitions. I believe that within FIG's objective scoring system, Shang Chunsong deserved to win. She outclassed the other women by FIG's simplistic yet convoluted scoring of difficulty and execution. She is a woman who has aged out of the sport she dedicated her life to and has latched onto another viable pathway to staving off poverty and restoring her brother's eyesight. She cannot be blamed for transitioning, attending and doing her best. Still, this is a glaring example that FIG's system is fundamentally flawed.

What we are seeing with FIG, in how they objectively reward vertical progression across three primary and recurring obstacles (platform, slanted wall, and high-bar), is, in essence, gymnastics, but expanded.

Let me remind you of Matthias Mayer's comparison between art and sport: "Arts evolve and diversify all the time. Sports do not evolve, but approximate the limits within their frameworks."

We can certainly see progress within FIG's framework, and we will continue to do so for a time. However, when the progress is vertical and within such a narrow framework – maxing out rotations of bar, platform, and slanted wall tricks – progress will become limited and peak at some point, as with the 100m sprint. One seemingly easy way to expand the limits for progress is to account for how and where the tricks are performed on the course, as we know, environment-based sports should. However, as I've said, this becomes

practically impossible if we expect to uphold a rigorous objective scoring system.

On the polar opposite end of the scale, the judging systems of Gizmo Style Battles and Tempest's Kings Of The Concrete are entirely subjective. The four or five judges vote solely on their overall impression, which may seem wishy-washy and potentially unfair, but the organisers assemble a judging panel of experts in the sport, with vast knowledge, experience, and broad appreciation. This allows competitors to play to their strengths and express their style, as a Style comp should, rather than imposing a rigid rubric that forces them to tick boxes to score highly.

In almost every competition with subjective scoring systems, you can expect to hear some vehement disagreements about who placed where and who was robbed of first place. Some will agree with the overall outcome, while others will naturally disagree. However, with an objective system based on a slapdash, limited table of tricks that discounts crucial nuances of environment usage, they are almost guaranteed to leave everyone in disagreement with the outcome.

Calen Chan has said in defence of FIG's judging, "[Red Bull Art Of Motion judging is] extremely inconsistent and it leaves everyone scratching their heads every year, having NO IDEA what they are being scored on. The FIG judging system is fully documented and open for public examination. If you score a 23.5 and another guy scores a 26.0, the judges will be able to tell you EXACTLY why and where on the Code of Points you fell short and what to work on in the future. It is incredibly more consistent and predictable than any other parkour competition in history."

Aleksandra Shevchenko has also remarked, "Are there any other prescribed (written) rules internationally distributed for Freerunning? Spoiler: NO. The community had five years of 'fuck FIG' division with hashtags and t-shirts, and yet we still don't have prescribed rules. The idea was to focus on connections. As you can see, it didn't work well. Instead of coming up with a varied run, the athletes simply repeated the same move (rolls, cartwheel, pistol wall jump) five times in the same run to fill the course that was designed for Speed runs."

Some who take competition seriously clearly desire clarity. It's common for competitors to bombard judges with questions about how they could improve for next time. What they are asking, in essence, is, "How can I better mould my inadequate, unique style and performance to appease this specific judging system?" The less specific the judging system, the freer parkourists are to train as they please and to represent their art in competition, rather than being moulded to any prescribed ideal. As soon as there is a predetermined ideal to aim for, parkourists will train to pigeonhole themselves.

The ideal format may not need to be entirely subjective, with only *overall impression*, as with Gizmo or KOTC. Still, a degree of subjectivity in judging seems entirely unavoidable if we wish to allow for innovation, freedom, horizontal progression, and the appreciation of the limitless nature of the broad, environment-based sport that parkour is. Subjective-based systems enable judges to account for the broad skill tree, and all its branches, and foster progress in all directions—the branches continue to grow outward and sprout leaves. While an objective-based system, as far as I can imagine, causes the leaves to wilt or entire branches to be lopped off and left to rot. It fosters progress in one direction—up. The branchless tree grows higher and higher towards the sky, as a giant obelisk. Once its tippy-top reaches its narrowest point and can't grow any narrower, its growth eventually halts entirely.

There will always be grassroots events like Gizmo, Kings Of The Concrete, and SPL to foster broader, less predictable progress; competitions that push and showcase the full breadth of what parkour can be. However, when FIG takes parkour to the largest sports stage on earth, it is their version that the world will see. Their expanded gymnastics will be viewed as the unequivocal epitome of parkour, and future generations, without any other prior core community influence, may practice in alignment with FIG's narrow ideals. In the mainstream public's eye, their representation of our sport will muscle its way to dominance. An evident divide has already emerged within our community, and the Olympics, under a sanitised gymnastics rubric, will only deepen it.

The Divide Grows

Diversity has always been viewed as a strength within our fragmented community, although, as you've read in previous chapters, some divides have not been without their quarrels. In 2025, we're seeing an opening chasm between what can be generally referred to as the street rats and the FIG athletes. In some sense, it can appear eerily similar to the parkour and freerunning divide from the days of yore, except it is slightly more nuanced than simply the issue of going upside down or not. The groups can be harder to characterise, and, as with the parkour and freerunning divide, many people fall somewhere in the middle.

The common street rats can generally be characterised by their long jean shorts, accompanied by a set of keys jangling on a carabiner at their waist, and either a Kipa skater belt or simply a shoelace. They typically wear a plaid-patterned button-up shirt, usually scissor-cut around the hips or a full crop cut. They can generally be seen in skate shoes, holding a 2000s handycam and a thick Gefam beanie, no matter the weather, often hiding their bleached buzz cut with a botched dye pattern. They have numerous spontaneous stick-and-poke tattoos from their drunk friend with a mullet that looks like it's been cut with kitchen scissors. Many of them are cosplaying as people with working-class parents, yet they will pay for the transatlantic trip to the Oslo Movement Gathering and Kipa Jam on mummy and daddy's AMEX card. They will primarily attend jams and competitions held on the streets unless the built set-up passes a certain degree of graffiti or dirt. They are mostly tattoo artists or DJs, or both.

Many of the men are guilty of stealing gay valour and will paint their fingernails to seem more sensitive and less threatening to the women they're trying to fuck. Some are guilty of stealing leftovers from restaurant tables. The common street rats' travelling habits are akin to vagabond beatnik savages; when a group of eight are denied hosting when visiting a city, they will happily camp it out on a rooftop in the rain rather than pay €6 for a hostel. Irony poisoning is a common affliction among the street rats, to the point where they'll

compromise an otherwise immaculate and artistic video piece by slotting a Katy Perry dubstep remix in the middle.

Their movement styles span a broad range, from artistic and expressive, commonly labelled as "funk", "gizmo" or "off-axis style", to the raw, slap-in-the-face Capstone-esque style. Some of them like to tout themselves as having a creative style, but their ideas are entirely derivative.

Just because they're street rats at heart doesn't mean they can't also spend an inordinate amount of time in the gym; however, many of them can usually be found spending whole sessions squirming around on a soft-topped vault box in four thousand different ways.

Some creators prioritise creating hard-hitting, culture-heavy video parts with elements of storytelling for YouTube over amassing a following on Instagram, and will claim that those putting all their stock into social media are only contributing to the saturated content dump; however, the thought-out projects that they laboured for nine months to create will rarely break three hundred views.

When training outside, they will seek out unusual non-spots with a particular aesthetic rather than the usual run-of-the-mill established spots, although these non-spots usually tend to be dumpsters next to signposts.

The average FIG athlete's Instagram bio will boast their medals first and foremost. Scroll down on their profile from there, and you'll see an overwhelming variety of shades of wood, only occasionally interrupted by the blue hue of crash mats, sprung floor, air tracks or airbags, a gym selfie, a MyProtein ad, a morning routine video, a holiday pic from Dubai, and of course, a FIG course.

Their standard training attire is general activewear, typically featuring thigh-high shorts for men and skin-tight shorts for women, paired with a matching sports bra. As for the upper body for men, they are usually topless. That is, you'd be hard-pressed ever to catch them wearing T-shirts, unless, of course, a tight-fitting one from their national team uniform during a FIG comp. For footwear, they opt for Vans Ultra Range, as they are sporty yet cool and urban. Or barefoot, not in a Phil Doyle or Leo Urban way, but a gym rat who never sees the sun kind of way. For accessories, you can expect a knee

compression sleeve or almost mummified in physio tape draped around every joint. Their attire outside of training consists of fits that slip between the cracks of any particular trend, not because of any norm-core fashionista ideology, but because they are stylistically challenged. Their haircut makes their head look like a broccoli floret. Their Pit Vipers or aviator shades match the colour of their sliders and favourite Monster Energy drink flavour. Overall, their fits tend to scream, "Imagine Dragons are the best band ever!" Or when out having a steak dinner in Dubai with the lads, in which case they go all out and unironically cosplay as little 1920s mob bosses.

Many of the lads are crypto bros and have been indoctrinated by the many false idols of the Manosphere, and are likely card-carrying members of Andrew Tate's Hustlers' University pyramid scheme. The lads come across as hyper-masculine in a way that would put anyone in the gay community on edge, until you get a few pints down them at a FIG afterparty and suddenly they're performing castaways off each other's butts in the middle of a dance floor flip circle. Despite the performative machismo, FIG athletes' travel habits are akin to those of a princess, and are seldom caught without a U-shaped neck pillow in their bright yellow North Face duffel. They are far more familiar with an Airbnb lockbox than with a sleeping bag. They think nepotism is a kind of ice cream with three different flavours.

They spend an increasing amount of time in the gym on strength and conditioning. However, most of it will consist of either ladder drill tap dancing or convoluted functional training that places too much emphasis on stability. Or on the other end of the spectrum, simply maxing out squat, bench and deadlift every session and trying to get swole pipes and cum gutters on a classic bro split to impress the girls, however, solely receiving praise from other insecure straight chads. Some will do sets of one hundred low box jumps to become more explosive, when the only goal they're achieving is fatigue. And then they'll try to ice bath, sauna and massage gun away the chronic soreness, as prescribed by their god-king guru, Joe Rogan.

Their rare outdoor session will consist of platform tricks at the beach or time trials at parkour parks. Most of their training time is spent dialling in the same high-bar, platform, and slanted wall tricks.

They have never saved clips for a video part, viewing them as a waste of time and energy that could be better spent pursuing Instagram stardom. Most of their training content is stale, has a commercial tone, is cut together with whatever music is trending on TikTok or Reels, and is, all in all, entirely forgettable.

One commonality among the two groups is their desire to see parkour receive more attention, thereby reaching a larger audience and increasing participation. Thus, having more people experience all that parkour has to offer and helping to develop a thriving industry with more professionals earning a steady living within the sport. The apparent difference lies in how to achieve that goal. One seems to aim at creating something culturally cool and authentic that audiences will resonate with, while the other aims for peak athleticism in competition on the largest possible stage, utilising that platform to push the ceiling of commercial growth. Other street sports and subcultures heavily inspire the street rats, who wish to follow in their footsteps. Most of them celebrate the diversity of styles and see it as increasing accessibility, since it means there is more parkour for varying personalities to fall in love with. The FIG athletes are inspired by billboards and cereal boxes featuring Olympic athletes' faces. They see FIG as the most direct route to parkour's commercial peak. At the same time, the street rats are firmly convinced that their representation will lead us astray, undermining the culturally authentic future they envision. They view its narrow scope of elite athleticism as closing off the sport to many people, making it seem inaccessible, while the FIG camp sees it as broadening the sport's respectability. One is more ragtag, artistic, and rebellious, while the other is more buttoned-up and willing to set aside the more free-and-rebellious aspects to achieve their goals.

Many of the street rats may be just as ill-informed as some FIG athletes about the risks of the gymnastics federation wrapping its talons around the sport, but purely at face value, they view it as lame, sanitised and soulless, and something to steer away from.

The disdain can go both ways. Aleksandra Shevchenko has pushed back at FIG naysayers, demanding that Roof Culture and Capstone are even worse for parkour's public image. She has claimed

that those applauding Justin Louey's heinous sends and bails in Capstone videos, while also condemning FIG's representation of parkour, are demonstrating a double standard. In the comment thread of my scathing anti-FIG post, she also implied that Storror is far worse for parkour's public image than FIG and signed off with #FuckRoofCulture. There may be some nuanced validity to these claims (even though much of the public characterised parkour as roof jumps long before Storror existed, and if she'd seen the film, she'd know that it provided a lot of context to the topic, rather than just perpetuating the *parkour = badass roof jumps* view.); however, the difference is that Capstone, Storror, or anyone else representing parkour in any form are doing so authentically. And still, none of them has the power to dominate the majority of a culture of such rich plurality. More importantly, they aren't financially coerced and conforming to a faulty judging system spawned by an entirely different sport when representing parkour. Other representations of parkour have occurred naturally, whereas FIG's representation is borne of the IOC and their objective judging ideal, exerting influence and muddying the waters of an otherwise freely evolving culture. And, as I've made clear, they muscle their way into becoming the dominant representation of our culture the more they dig their heels in and grow towards the Olympics.

Another prominent example of a growing fissure between groups is in the comment section of a Gizmo Style Battles post featuring one of Charles Auguste's competition lines from 2024. As is common for Charles's more avant-garde takes on parkour, his line featured almost theatrical elements of contemporary dance with creative interaction with the complex course. His flow seemed to seamlessly alternate between a sure-footed and rapid tempo to flopping over obstacles like a limp wet noodle, appearing almost as if someone was sporadically switching him off, then rebooting him throughout the line. The movement was creative, expressive and densely technically complex.

Many comments were to the tune of, "Parkour is cooked", or, "What happened to parkour?" Or, "This is sad to see. Woke has caught up to parkour." And, of course, many argued that it is not parkour altogether. "This is a circus performance, not parkour. No hate, just

facts." Some sad sacks with fragile masculinities even commented with overt homophobia, as if a man expressing a style they view as feminine offends their masculinity just by way of existing. Among the numerous terrible takes were those from a few prominent FIG athletes. The Netherlands' Tangui Van Schingen simply commented, "Parkour?" And, of course, I had to throw my hat in the ring and ask, "Compared to what exactly? FIG lines?" To which Tangui replied, "Here we go again."

Yes, here we go again! Tangui, bringing Charles Auguste's line into question, was throwing stones from a glasshouse when most of his and his ilk's training is centred around expanded gymnastics competitions. Clément Jadoul, co-founder of Nozaru Project, a gym with the Belgian gymnastics federation's banners plastered all over its walls, swooped into Tangui's corner, retorting:

> "Compared to parkour, quite simply. Sorry, but this is not the parkour I fell in love with when I first started. It's not the parkour that you promote with your videos. I don't think I've ever seen Storror legends moving like that. You know exactly what parkour is about, and it's not that. It's as much parkour as theatre, circus or urban dance. Parkour is not equal to 'movement'. All sport is movement, but not all sports are parkour. What we were fighting at first with FIG, with denaturing the sport, is, somehow, not a problem anymore with Gizmo shits."

Firstly, he likely failed to recognise that Drew and Josh from Storror certainly do train with a more artistic style that Clément may likely detest. Josh has even collaborated with Charles Auguste on a video project. Still, Storror has never claimed, or aimed, to represent all of parkour, and each of us celebrates its diversity and welcomes its continued evolution.

Secondly, can you imagine what parkour would be like if it had stayed the same as it was when Clément started in 2012? Luckily, it has branched out in many directions while simultaneously continuing to grow in more traditional ways. A new branch developing doesn't simply cut off another. This style is not taking

anything away from Clément, Tangui, Ry Abiang, Ilia Movahed or any others in the comments whose tastes it doesn't align with. No one is forcing them to do it or appreciate it. If they don't like it, they don't have to watch. There is more space in the sport for their tastes and what they arrogantly deem parkour. A few of them began to sound like the sanctimonious purists from 2005 to 2015, with their rigid assertions. However, the shoe is now on the other foot, as their current training methods are precisely what the traditionalist anti-flip purists once railed against as parkour. The more the comments continued rolling in, the more it brought back memories of the loathsome parkour vs. freerunning period.

Thirdly, by the time Clément had started training in 2012, Oleg Vorslav's pivotal *Out Of Time* video had already been released, which inspired a wave of dance-inspired parkour, as well as revolutionising the 'freerunning' side of the sport in general. Charles Auguste can just as easily be inspired by the influence of Vorslav, Jason Paul, Tim Shieff, and Pasha Petkuns as by contemporary dance. Charles's style in this Gizmo line is not as divergent and revolutionary as his detractors claim. As Ryan Taggart replied, "This style's been around forever. Spaghettimorph flippy-floppy is just a new hat on an old head."

Clément Jadoul also claims, "I'm not personally involved with FIG; I'm involved in parkour legacy and heritage. I started parkour in its golden age, watching your [Storror] videos. I stand for maintaining these roots as the basis of parkour's definition."

I admit that I thoroughly enjoyed this response! Spoken like a true parkour conservative and Neo-purist. The "golden era" is not an agreed-upon period. It is entirely relative to the individual and the timeframe for which they feel the most nostalgia. For an old purist who revelled in the vitriolic forum debates, it may be a period between 2006 and 2010. Some may view the mid-2010s as the golden era, when big international jams began to emerge, and Team Farang, Storm, Galizian Urban Project, Storror, and Team Jestion were regularly releasing culture-heavy videos. Some who have started in the last two or three years likely see the present as their golden era. Clément clinging to the period he holds most dear and scorning

anyone who deviates from his nostalgic ideals is pretty childish and anti-progress.

I replied, facetiously asking Clément to define parkour for me, as he's so adamant about maintaining its roots and keeping everyone neatly in line with its definition. Unfortunately, no definition followed. Not even any core themes that may have helped to understand where he was coming from, or where he may have been contradicting himself. Once again, I believe it's clear that it's not how Charles' line fell outside of the definition, but more that it fell outside of Clément's tastes. And, unfortunately for him, individual tastes are not a barometer for what makes something parkour or not.

Tangui replied, "I think FIG, with professional athletes who dedicate themselves to competition, risking their lives and trying to push the sport to the next level, is better than (in my opinion) floppy, lazy, drunk-looking dancing-looking moves. Which one would a kid be more inspired by?"

This wrongly assumes that all children aspire to hyper-macho big tricks and, in turn, are put off by anything else. Some kids may be drawn to what they see at a FIG competition, whereas some may prefer Gizmo. And if you're a nerdy kid, as Max Henry was, you'll be drawn in by seeing someone stick a rail precision. Again, diversity in competitions and media is a strength, as it increases the potential to attract diverse demographics. Needless to say, labelling movement as "*feminine*" or "*gay*" as a negative value judgement is not only sexist and homophobic, but also exclusionary to all those within our sport who don't choose to, or are unable to live up to their arbitrary ideals of masculinity in movement. In their view, it's the macho way or the highway. This labelling also ignores the fact that many gay men align far more with traditional masculinity than any FIG athlete, and sexual orientation has nothing to do with it.

As for "risking their lives and trying to push the sport to the next level", Ryan Taggart jumped in to reply, "You're implying that any of that matters to decide whether something has value or deserves to be respected in its own lane. Both push the sport regarding line with their respective value systems. You cannot watch the whole Gizmo event and then tell me that FIG is pushing creativity and high-level style any more than Gizmo. Plus, FIG's rulesets have

historically restricted any athletes who would/could push that side of things."

Also, as an aside... risking their lives? Speaking as if it's a righteous and noble cause. FIG athletes are voluntarily performing perfectly fine-tuned and rehearsed tricks in a choreographed routine on a wooden course; it's hardly storming the beaches of Normandy. If you allow me a brief moment for a little armchair psychology, it's clear that Tangui and others, who scornfully insult Gizmo, are victims of the masculinity crisis. Not in the sense that they have microplastics in their nuts and have less testosterone than men 50 years ago, I mean that many men feel they have fewer avenues for aligning with traditional ideals of masculinity in the modern world. They have no wars to fight, so they feel the need to create little wars of their own, which often end up being ice baths and saunas, despite the latter literally being a way to relax for most people. They dramatise and aggrandise voluntary suffering in the gym to get big, masculine-looking muscles, while failing to realise that doing the same mindless, cookie-cutter bro-split routine in an air-conditioned room is not only highly replicable by any tosser with a gym membership, but is also a far cry from a noble, traditionally masculine cause—for instance, rushing into a burning building to rescue a baby. In other words, it's not a fucking war! In fact, doing joint-isolation exercises until your muscles become swollen with blood so you can enjoy 15 minutes admiring yourself in the changing room mirrors, can be considered pretty feminine. And pretty gay, honestly. And with the incessant feeling of falling short of the masculine ideal, these feckless men project this insecurity onto other men who are comfortable living life without desperately worrying about aligning with it.

For parkourists who solely endeavour to max out the difficulty of their tricks and unimaginatively string them together into an ill-composed mess, it's easy to see how Charles' exceptionally artistic and theatrical line offended a few FIG athletes' sensibilities. They see themselves as the brave ones pushing the sport, and Charles and other artists as abhorrent, limp lettuce, low testosterone, woke fairies who are making parkour look gay. In reality, Charles and others continue to expand the broad skill tree and open up parkour to a wider demographic, while also executing highly technical lines that

even some of the best FIG athletes would struggle to replicate, even if their lives depended on it.

Many have chastised the FIG athletes for compromising their style to fit a gymnastics-inspired objective rubric, even to the point where Mikeš Kořínek performed a parody of a standard FIG line at the start of his 2025 Gizmo line. When the FIG athletes see the polar opposite receiving such praise, it's easy to see why they shout foul. Many in both groups think the other group's styles stink. The difference is that the emergent FIG athletes' style is criticised for being an outcome of the constraints of a narrow and broken system, and thus, is not only inauthentic but also corrodes freedom, unique expression, and diversity of styles. Whereas the other, which has emerged authentically and been built upon naturally for years, is criticised solely for being too free and open, not difficult enough, hypo-masculine, and, according to some reprehensible commenters... gay. Many FIG athletes have previously claimed that they joined to help steer FIG in the right direction from the inside. If their views on the sport are anything like the above, the future of our sport is in truly awful hands—in the hands of the Neo-purists.

Hating on each other's styles and lines is one thing, but there is another example that the divide is growing in a negative direction. In 2024, one evening after a FIG competition in Portugal, Elis Torhall messaged the Lisbon WhatsApp group chat, explaining that he, Shea Rudolph, and Jai Bos had their Airbnb fall through. He then asked very politely if anyone could host them for the night. The first to respond was Cristóvão Morais, who said, "Hey, Elis. You should probably contact your friends first."

Underneath, he linked the Portuguese gymnastics federation website and said, "Aqui é Portugal, mate! We're not clowns! We take parkour seriously. I'm sure your FIG friends will sort it out for you."

Pedro Salgado replied, "Guys, I think that's a bit too much. This group is meant to join the community."

Another in the group replied, "I was gonna say, I find this a bit extreme and shocking."

Luis Alkmim, who at this point seems to have it out for Elis, chimed in with, "Cute mindset. I will show you what's shocking"

He then forwarded a message that read, "I got refused a subsidy recently for our new gym because we aren't affiliated with the regional federation, of which we explained, there are none. To which they said you need to affiliate with the gymnastics federation, because, and I quote, *they said parkour is their sport*"

Luis continued, "Today I heard four fucking shocking stories about local federations because they are not aligned with FIG. People who have been creating parkour stuff for decades. So honestly, I love a little bit of hostility to FIG sheep because they are ruining a legacy created for decades."

Cristóvão Morais chirped up again, saying, "Man's turning his back on the community by helping FIG, but when he needs a place to sleep, he's looking for help in the parkour group chats."

Following this was a lot of pushback from a few others who thought they were going too far, bombarding and bullying someone in their time of need. Luis replied, "Too far is beating them up, calling them names, insulting them at jams. It's just a little online insult to people who are the marketing front to a massive corporation stealing our jobs. And every time they go and support parkour gymnastics, more and more of their thousands of followers normalise the idea that parkour is gymnastics. Some people need to be harsh. It's been too easy."

This whole back-and-forth must have made Elis and the others feel pretty unwelcome and alienated in their own community. As you've seen, I've, regrettably, written some divisive things publicly regarding FIG, including singling out my friend David Nelmes for an easy laugh. Still, I have hosted David multiple times since then. And upon hearing about this episode, I felt obliged to reach out to Elis and let him know that, regardless of our position on FIG competitions and their governance, he and the others will always have a place to stay in Brighton.

Making someone feel like they're an outsider in their own community will only push them to believe that their only home and safe haven is solely with the rest of the FIG crowd. Calm, respectful discourse in person, where you can exchange ideas in good faith, will always be far more effective than abrasive arguments online full of ad hominem attacks. The latter will only widen the divide, push people

deeper into their echo chambers and create a mentality of 'us and them'. The FIG athletes are not the enemies; they are but pawns in the gymnastic monolith's game who are riding the wave. Whether they are involved for their financial interest or because they sincerely see FIG as the path forward for the sport, the real threat is posed by the gymnastics colonisers who only wish to extract from us while actively clipping the wings of those who have built parkour.

The massive international jams throughout the 2010s, such as FAM Jam, Gravity Sucks, and 4 The Love Of Movement, would always leave you with a huge sense of family and community. Regardless of whether you spent most of the jam barefoot on the air track or on the built setup doing various rail precisions, there was a sense of belonging and connectedness to the same weird culture of movers.

Many international jams have since become cliquey. Different events have emerged that appeal to either the street rats or the FIG athletes. There is a similar sense of unity at these events, but divided into separate chunks. The largest communal melting pot that is reminiscent of the old mega jams seems to be OMFG (Oslo Movement Festival Gathering). Despite being a multi-sport event, with the addition of tricking and Death Diving, it consistently boasts the most extensive list of invited parkourists in parkour jam history, featuring a roster comprised of big names from both the street rat and FIG athlete cliques. It's clear that the OMFG organisers, Ansel Darrell, Erik Cedeberg, Felix Holmström and Kim Svensson appreciate everyone across the spectrum and just want to bring people together. The diversity of the guests attracts a diversity of attendees from around the globe. An event such as this, where everyone is happily moving together, eating together, sleeping in the same gym amongst each other, getting hyped about mad shit being thrown down together, dancing together, moshing together, and doing drunk flips on the dance floor flip circle together, it seems as though there is once again harmony in the community and balance is restored. We need more of this, as they are fantastic reminders that we, as those of the parkour and freerunning divide of old, are all more alike than we are different. We're all losers who jump on walls.

An Iron Fist In A Velvet Glove

Enough Kumbaya. Let's wheel it back a bit. In case you missed it, Luis Alkmim spoke about how national gymnastics federations are blocking subsidies to gyms. This is sadly true for grassroots organisations in Belgium, Switzerland and Portugal. There have now been numerous accounts from various countries that gymnastics has begun to clamp down and exert control. You can find parkour listed as a gymnastics discipline on many gymnastics national federation websites. As feared, FIG are rolling out parkour coaching certifications in many of these countries, and sports authorities and insurers view them as the official certifications, thus devaluing other pre-existing or yet-to-exist grassroots qualifications. In 2022, more than eighty countries had already started to roll out classes, and as you can imagine, these will most likely be gymnastics coaches teaching in gymnastics gyms. Real parkour coaches without their certification will find it much more difficult and expensive to get insurance.

Gymnastics has injected its way into our modular gym and event equipment market with Brick Parkour, a company owned by the multinational corporation Gymnova, which, of course, holds close ties with FIG. Brick Parkour, in collaboration with FIG, toured South America and Southeast Asia in 2023 and 2024. They collaborated with local parkour organisations, hosting events that included workshops and competitions, and donating a few vault boxes to gyms along the way. But as you might expect, beneath the surface of the smiles and good vibes on their social media posts, there was something more nefarious going on.

Before the tour, the Malaysian gymnastics federation demanded that Parkour Malaysia, one of the country's top coaching organisations and a communal staple, dissolve its company and be absorbed under the federation for the Kuala Lumpur event. This doesn't seem like a goodwill tour or a charity effort for small, struggling communities. This seems a lot more like colonialism. (Trust me, I'm British, we were fantastic at it!) The tour rolled through Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Hanoi, Manila, San José, Santo Domingo, San Salvador and Panamá City. With each stop, local gyms

and organisations may have been presented with the same ultimatum. This is the kind of slow and quiet takeover that we have feared since the beginning, and it's all under the guise of helping communities grow, when really, it's all about extraction. To maximise funding and expand their monopoly, it's in FIG's best interest to build communities of competitors to fill their World Cup series with an equal distribution of countries. What may seem a noble cause, such as their efforts to increase female participation in small communities, is often driven by financial interests, especially as they risk losing IOC funding if gender diversity quotas aren't met. And even then, in many instances, they have brought on female gymnasts and breakdancers to fill out their women's divisions. (From one account I heard, a gymnast spent the majority of her line doing consecutive aerials in a circle.)

It is the less-developed and underfunded communities that will feel the effects most. This is not to say there haven't been accounts of benefits for smaller communities worldwide. According to Juan D. Salazar, an international FIG parkour judge, FIG accelerated the process of official recognition in Colombia, which led to more professional opportunities, a better public image, and, in turn, more students at gyms. With their institutional association, they can more easily request state or private support for projects and competitions. Juan says, "This kind of progress was unimaginable before FIG recognised parkour. Refusing to integrate with gymnastics would mean choosing the hardest possible path for the development of parkour."

In Hungary, the community that died with a whimper was reignited by FIG through its competitions, giving individuals something to strive for. Representing their country has provided a spotlight, leading to professional opportunities.

Mexican parkourists can receive scholarship funding of between €500 and €1,500 per month from sports bodies, depending on their placement on the leaderboards at World Cups. Their national coach also receives a monthly salary. (Mexico is by no means a small community. Mexico City likely has one of the largest communities in the world. However, parkour has still been underfunded, especially in smaller cities.) It was also easier to fund and build two outdoor parks

in Cancún and Querétaro, as parkour was under the gymnastics federation. (Despite both parks being replicas of the FIG speed courses.) The same applies to the Slovakian community, which has both outdoor and indoor facilities built with the help of their gymnastics federation.

It's hard to deny that this handful of examples is all fantastic developments, and all things that many of us were entirely sceptical of in the beginning. In some places, many of the early proposed benefits have come to fruition, and in most cases, it's hard to imagine we would have achieved them without FIG's support. Our top grassroots annual competitions struggle to put together a fraction of FIG's prize pools. FIG dishes out tens of thousands of euros for multiple World Cups a year, and in some countries, a decent prize pool is available for national events. Parkourists now have a full-fledged national and international competition circuit, despite their dismal shortcomings. For many talented parkourists in various countries, the barrier to entry for attending grassroots competitions is astronomically high, due to travel expenses and the difficulty of obtaining visas. This often results in talented parkourists having only a short time in the competitive field. Even for the gold medalists. In a Parkour UK article titled "*The Myth of The Parkour Career*", Charlie Havill writes, "Prize money rarely covers travel, and what you would have spent on travel rarely covers everything else. So, the ability to compete internationally becomes less about being the best athlete... and more about who can afford to keep showing up."

FIG can help lower this barrier dramatically, allowing talent from countries like Iran, Algeria, Turkey and China to compete and train with the rest of the community that they would otherwise remain isolated from. FIG World Cups regularly host the broadest collection of nationalities of any international parkour competition.

Receiving scholarship money for parkour is an incredible achievement for the sport; something most of us would never have imagined possible. Parkourists can earn a living by training and competing, as long as they consistently bring home medals or stay in the top ten at World Cups. Convincing governments and councils to build parks can be a desperate struggle, even in areas with higher social spending. If an established and respected federation makes it

easier for councils to part with their money more willingly, that is great. Juan D. Salazar might be right in saying that refusing to integrate with gymnastics means choosing the hardest possible path for the development of parkour. But it would still be ours.

Ryan Ford has expressed more recently, "In 2017, APEX chose the hardest path by becoming the first parkour organisation to denounce affiliation with FIG. Ultimately, this led to us losing our flagship gym during the COVID-19 pandemic due to a lack of funding. While we narrowly avoided bankruptcy soon after, we have never received or requested financial support from any U.S. sports organisations. As a small business in a niche industry, we've struggled financially since 2006. If we had continued working with FIG from the beginning, like Jump Freerun, we would've most likely avoided all of this adversity. In retrospect, I would change nothing."

This may seem tremendously stubborn, but this is more about the resistance to relinquishing control. And control is precisely what we have lost.

In May 2023, FIG president Morinari Watanabe told *Inside The Games*, "Parkour has a big potential for its development, but we are not focused on the Olympics. Football, what is their goal? To go to the Olympic Games? No. Their World Cup is the number one priority when it comes to a sporting event. Parkour is the same. It has the potential to fight with football, I think. If one day it becomes an Olympic sport, we will be very happy, but this is not our goal; parkour's goal is to challenge football."

Firstly, challenging football for popularity is wildly unrealistic and overly optimistic. Secondly, this does not mean they are no longer aiming for the Olympics in the future. Combined with earlier statements saying, "The only way that parkour could have been added [in Paris 2024] was if it replaced existing gymnastic events", I see this new statement only as them allowing more time to decide which of their disciplines they wish to remove from the Olympic programme with parkour in its stead. And in the meantime, they will build on parkour's World Cup series and coaching to leech all they can from it.

The Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique may be a non-profit entity under Swiss law, but it functions very much like a corporation by way of maximising its revenue. It typically runs on modest operating margins, and its overall budgets are designed to break even across Olympic cycles. However, that does not mean they don't extract as much as possible for their executives' salaries. And FIG do not disclose their wages publicly. FIFA, however, (which is also a non-profit organisation), does make its executive wages publicly available. Total annual payouts by FIFA for management and council are in the tens of millions, with its president on between $3.9 million and $4.6 million per year. There is a clear financial incentive for FIG to hold a monopoly on parkour as much as possible and funnel its revenue to the top.

In October 2020, in the Spanish region of Valencia, the local gymnastics federation seems to have successfully convinced the local government to classify parkour as a high-risk sport, and thus an illegal activity for recreational groups to engage in. The legal document states, "Due to the risk of high accidents, the practice of parkour must be carried out inside a sports club and in the federated area, and with the subscription of civil liability and sports accident insurance."

This is flat-out appalling! The UK's governing body, Parkour UK, fought tooth and nail to protect the free practice of the sport when parkour was banned in Horsham in September 2016. To see a gymnastics federation that supposedly looks out for our interests do the exact opposite is deeply troubling. They are doing their utmost to keep parkour and coaching inside their gyms under their tutelage.

I've heard similar stories from elsewhere. Gyms in Turkey have banned students and athletes from training outdoors. A friend from Japan told me, "Things have been difficult in Japan lately. The Japan Gymnastics Association is claiming that practising parkour outdoors is illegal. They've even said they will report those who do it, and if an athlete is involved [with FIG], they might cancel their competition results. Of course, no law in Japan actually bans parkour."

A friend in New Zealand who coaches parkour through a gymnastics gym has said that he will be fired if he trains outside with

his students or hosts any jams or events without their permission. Luckily, he managed to earn his students' parents' trust, and they're happy to keep the outdoor jams a secret from the gym.

I have heard accounts from parkourists in North African countries where, when anyone speaks out publicly expressing any level of negative opinion or concern, they are blackballed, shamed within their community and banned from entering all gyms and competitions, including competitions at an international level. And in doing so, as their influence over the community is so dominant, these parkourists are entirely excluded from the rest of the community. In some cases, the community turns against them, and they are even made to feel unwelcome at outdoor sessions. Due to the restrictive nature of these federations, many parkourists, some of whom have been training from as early as 2005, have either quit training or left their countries to pursue parkour elsewhere. I have been told that in Algeria, there are barely any people left who are still training.

It's far easier for FIG to prey on developing countries, offering scraps of funding and access to gymnastics gyms in exchange for complete control. In these smaller communities, FIG doesn't simply coexist with the existing community; it absorbs and colonises.

Regarding Parkour Earth and others protesting FIG's governance, President Watanabe has responded to the press, "Who can say football is my sport? Who can say basketball is my sport? Sport is for everybody. This is the FIG's philosophy: we want to be an organiser of competitions to help educate children through our system. This is our parkour, but if somebody wants to make another parkour body, we respect it. I don't know why they are against it. If there is a brotherhood of parkour, we must respect each other to grow parkour in the world."

Except, this is far from what is happening. This is anything but mutual respect and *live-and-let-live*. They are ruling with an iron fist, actively creating a monopoly by stomping out all market competition and excommunicating anyone in their ranks who dissents. By insisting that parkour is dangerous and by pushing laws that create communities that exclusively train indoors, they are not only destroying our community's years-long efforts to counter this

oversimplified, damaging public image, but also forcing a dependence on their gyms and coaching. They are creating a dependency on gymnastics.

This, combined with the absorption of parkour gyms and domination of the competition circuit and coaching certifications market, is the most overt and damaging example of a monopoly we've experienced in parkour's history.

For those who are enjoying the benefits of FIG swallowing the sport, and who have yet to *change it from the inside*, I hope it feels worth it. We have lost self-determination of our industry and culture. We are no longer at the reins. They wield the institutional power to define what parkour will become. We have lost control of what we have created.

Fire With Fire

Where are FIG's favourite penpals in all this? Where is the conglomerate of middle-aged, anti-competition quadrupedie enthusiasts who were created solely to be our line of defence against FIG's pilfering? Whether Parkour Earth can do anything at this point is painfully doubtful. They intend to be a democratic representative of potentially hundreds of thousands of practitioners worldwide, legitimising us as an organised practice. Although they may be adequate with all the bureaucratic wordy stuff, they are still far from being widely recognised as a respected authority within the community. Especially if their lousy online presence is anything to go by—their Instagram page, at the time of writing this, has a grand total of 2,996 followers. I know that things aren't all about followers, but in this case, it certainly indicates how little backing and influence this organisation has.

There's a video on their Instagram featuring some of their board members discussing an upcoming democratic forum where they intend to hear the community's ideas and queries. These people may be great pillars in their small and insulated bubbles, with many years of training and coaching under their belts, but they surely have to ask themselves, "Why the heck would people listen to me?" Although the

forum was a great idea with the best of intentions, the video sadly received only a handful of views. I imagine the turnout of their little forum was also pretty meagre. And considering the comments on the video post were archaic-sounding, blank-statement claims like, "Parkour should never be a competitive sport!" I assume the turnout consisted of parkour subreddit users with neckbeards, who are relics stuck in time, clinging to the nostalgic parkour dogmas of 2007, despite not having jumped on a wall since then.

Their YouTube account has eight two-hour videos, all part of their 2020 community engagement project, and all have between a whopping ten and forty views.

Their main attempt to build a platform for their democratic process is their Discord server, which has around 400 members and is, for all intents and purposes, a ghost town.

The IOC and Sport Accord only recognise one official international federation per sport. If multiple federations claim governance, they will determine which is better positioned to govern based on each federation's global representation, historical role, competition structure, governance, and integrity. Parkour Earth has been falling dramatically behind on multiple fronts. Most notably, a competition structure.

Early on, when FIG was merely a looming threat, it would have been wise for Parkour Earth to formalise competition standards and create an alternative federation-level international circuit to bolster the federation's legitimacy in the eyes of the IOC and other global sports bodies. This should have been Parkour Earth's primary defensive strategy, despite whatever their board members' views on competition may have been. The alternative to this defensive strategy would be to continue writing entirely ineffectual open letters, making empty threats of lawsuits, and quibbling over nonsense on their Discord server, which is akin to standing idly by while FIG storms ahead with their land grab, uninhibited. For years, they seemed to choose the latter.

If there was anyone among its ranks who was actively stalling progress in creating a competition circuit, it was most likely their old deputy chairman, John 'Hedge' Hall. On the Storror Podcast, I asked

him whether their board members were all anti-competition, to which he flatly answered, "Oh, I wish they were." Implying that he'd merrily be surrounded by a board that all agree with him and his conservative views.

A former board member, who was one of the few pushing for the competition agenda, told me that Hall had been quite aggressive in his arguments against establishing a circuit and that he felt it wasn't making room for the anti-competition camp in the global community, including himself. This would make sense from a democratic point of view; however, from my perspective, Hall appears either out of touch with the community at large or deliberately downplaying and misrepresenting the community's views on competition to push his militant anti-competitive agenda. I think it's a bit of both. He's certainly in his purist bubble, sheltered from the broader community's views, and he's also feigning ignorance to protect parkour from becoming all about competing.

The former Parkour Earth member told me that Hall's aggression surrounding the issue was their primary reason for leaving the organisation. However, since their departure, some fresh faces have been brought onto the team, helping diversify the board of representatives. These new ambassadors and board members, with their more modern outlooks, have helped move things along and have developed a competition research project that aims to collate a large amount of data to create the best competitions possible.

In May 2025, Parkour Earth announced that they were taking applications for a host city and local organising team to deliver their first World Championships in 2026. After being stuck in a bureaucratic standstill, the organisation finally seems to have some motion. And as you could expect, John 'Hedge' Hall was none too pleased with this news. Despite having left the organisation in 2023, Hall shared Parkour Earth's announcement on his Instagram story with the caption:

> "And so it has come to this. Parkour is not a unique and meaningful lifestyle whose practitioners strive to overcome obstacles and live a life according to a deeply personal philosophy of self-growth. Parkour is just another sport where we do big jumps. This is the path we chose. I don't know why this announcement hurts quite so deeply. I guess it just provides a boundary point where I know the parkour I dedicated my life to is definitely dead and buried. Gone and not returning. I feel grief for a concept that those who will be celebrating this moment will never understand. I'll, of course, continue the journey. As I know others will. But today, I'll take a moment to grieve for a discipline killed by business interest, political infighting and a *race to the bottom* culture."

If there was any more proof we needed that Hall was a spanner in the works of progress within Parkour Earth, this was it. What Hall is mourning is still very much alive, although he is too sheltered from the rest of the community to see it. And even if he were to spend more time with more of the community, his hyper-purist tinted glasses wouldn't allow him to see it. Currently, many still view the sport through the lenses of self-growth, curiosity and fulfilment, including those who regularly compete. The two are not mutually exclusive. The two motives co-exist within the culture, sub-communities and individuals. Parkour under the guidance of a genuine parkour federation is far more likely to steer the community toward a future that respects and makes space for both those who wish to compete and those who want to promote and reap the sport's many benefits. In the future, with FIG in control, that is far less likely. Their only goal is to extract from the sport. FIG is the one pushing a heavily competitive culture, as competition is their main product, and it will only get worse over time. FIG is creating a pipeline of young parkour gymnasts to feed into national competitions, which will then go on to World Cups. The future of parkour in their hands is far worse and far more competition-centric than in the hands of Parkour Earth, with or without a World Championships.

The whole point of this battle for sovereignty is to be in control of the sport's direction and how it is represented and perceived en masse. We are fighting against FIG's ham-fisted

representation, and when John Hall halted progress toward offering an alternative federation-level competitive circuit, it only aided FIG.

It is not a "race to the bottom"; it is fighting fire with fire. Because that is genuinely all we can do that has any potential to move the needle. We've seen how futile fighting fire with open letters has been. In an ideal world, we wouldn't need a federation; in the same way that countries shouldn't need militaries. But since other, more antagonistic countries have militaries, it makes sense to have a military as a line of defence, or at least as a deterrent against invasion. With us, we have been under invasion for nine years, and our line of defence has simply politely asked them to stop, like throwing pingpong balls at tanks. Although some may not like it, we need to get some *tanks* too.

Hall and other conservative Parkour Earth board members have only played into FIG's hand by stubbornly sticking to their anti-competition rhetoric and enforcing it almost autocratically. Now, FIG is already so far ahead, and Parkour Earth has a lot of catching up to do, with far less financial resources and community buy-in.

The Future

I honestly have no idea how this will pan out in the next decade. The situation is already looking rough, and as it stands, the cons of FIG governance seem to outweigh the pros. In the future, even with a full Parkour Earth international competition circuit in full swing, it's still unclear whether the IOC will accept them over the suits at FIG. As the IOC don't allow competing federations for the same sport, if Parkour Earth is strengthened by its competitive circuit and gains more buy-in from the community it claims to oversee, it may still have a leg in the race. The IOC could view Parkour Earth as the organisation with a stronger claim to the sport and boot out the organisation they're competing against. However, FIG has been very cosy with the IOC for over one hundred years, and their ties have already been strong enough for them to turn a blind eye to FIG's violations of IOC regulations and bylaws through its co-opting of parkour. It's difficult

to be optimistic with such corrupt bureaucratic institutions, but it's the only option at our disposal.

Who knows, in ten years from now, we might reread these words and laugh them off as paranoid naivety. I sincerely hope that is the case. But either way, for the sake of our sport's identity and industry, it might be a good time to back Parkour Earth. The same goes for USPK, SPL, independent grassroots gyms and any other organisation trying to make moves for the good of the scene.

I'm not a fan of any federation imposing top-down structure and rules on a sport and market that might be better off organising itself through the democratic process of customers voting with their money for independent companies. Still, when our industry, communities, and cultural identity are under threat from cold, calculated, dead-eyed career bureaucrats, we should probably support our federation, Parkour Earth.

With their Agenda 2020, the IOC want parkour in the Olympics for viewership and corporate sponsors, full stop. That is why they have stood by idly and taken a barrage of negative press on the chin as FIG has continued to dig its claws in. They don't care about the communities and organisations behind it or the way their decisions affect how the sport is practised and perceived. They prioritise the viewer's perspective above all else, aiming to create a saleable product that captures a large audience and boosts TV ratings.

It could be brilliant for us if parkour is included in the Olympics at some point. Despite being a sketchy bureaucratic territory notorious for corruption, Olympic inclusion certainly has its benefits. Imagine if Parkour Earth took a cut of the broadcast rights. In 2021, FIG's share totalled around $38.6 million. Parkour Earth could make a significant impact on the sport with even a fraction of that money. However, if parkour goes into the Olympics under FIG, you can bet that money will be spread to its other gymnastics disciplines, and parkour will be left with scraps.

As it stands, it is unclear to most of the community what Parkour Earth's purpose is. And in many cases, some don't know they exist. Parkour Earth need to make it far more straightforward what their mission is and how it can be achieved. It's also in their best interest to

make easily digestible, bullet-point arguments for why they are the better option over FIG. Right now, the pros and cons of FIG governance are widely unknown. There isn't much information laying out the facts and the risks, so the community remains apathetic or entirely in the dark. The FIG athletes see no reason to turn their backs on the hand that feeds them and will only continue to play to FIG's hand if not given a good reason or a good alternative. Hopefully, the Parkour Earth World Championships in Brno, Czech Republic, in October 2026 and the regional qualifying events provide that alternative. It can be seen as unprofessional for an international organisation's image to be so on the nose and combative, and Parkour Earth have seemed very shy to be bold in selling themselves in this regard. And I believe they will only get the community on board if they are far more brazen with their approach and image. They need to adopt an image of rebellion against FIG to rally the community. They need to stop pussyfooting around the issue to save face and begin convincing the community to support them for the sake of their own interests—to protect parkour's independence, to keep parkour's industry, identity and public image within our hands, and to ensure that our culture's overarching core values aren't transmuted into a punitive and overly-competitive culture of elitism and conditional self-worth. Once they do, they will gain more political mouthpieces for their cause and hopefully build momentum.

If all this fails and we remain in the stranglehold of the gymnastics autocratic overlords, and our sport slowly regresses over decades to a restrictive, predictable and codified dead end for elite gym rats, perhaps we will see a new subversive sport emerge. Many years down the line, those who have grown weary of the claustrophobic and tradition-laden culture of parkour may reject it completely and develop a sport that takes place outdoors, where every piece of urban furniture holds a vast array of movement opportunities available to all, regardless of whether they tick the boxes of a finite objective judging criteria. It will be free, expressive, curiosity-led, and centred around creative collaboration or individuals' goals. This new, free, rebellious, and subversive sport will have detached entirely from the shackles of its stale predecessor under a new name, such as Urban

Brick Touching, Concrete Scuttling, or Flumping. Many will join this new phenomenon with a sigh of relief, glad they have stumbled upon something so real, raw, liberating, inclusive, and accessible.

And then, in another few decades' time, when Concrete Scuttling gains global appeal and a meagre industry of its own, a predatory bureaucratic institution swoops in, co-opts it despite heavy protest from much of the Concrete Scuttlers, and ushers in a new era of codification and squashes the once free and inclusive activity to a stale, elitist and predictable point. And then the cycle repeats ad infinitum—an ongoing expansion and compression from free expression and exploration to overly competitive, structured rigidity.

However, it need not be this way. What we have with parkour right now, outside FIG's control, is beautiful. We must ensure its survival by any means, whether that be through Parkour Earth or by the community simply doubling down to outweigh FIG's representation of the sport. We are already the mouthpieces for authentic parkour; we must, however, make our voices louder. The parkourists with the largest online presence are currently dominating FIG in terms of our public image. FIG World Cups and World Championships may garner a lot of press attention, but they are still dwarfed by many of the platforms our community has organically created. When they take parkour to the Olympics, the scales may tip in FIG's favour. Still, between now and then, the more we can broadcast and establish our authentic identity and image, the more FIG's farcical representation at the Olympics will be viewed as something completely illegitimate. We can show the world how we want parkour perceived.

Alas, FIG and the Olympics aside, countless parkourists' online media are only exacerbating the difficulty of this already uphill battle.

Chapter 17 - Parkour, The Meme

The internet has played an integral role in the development of parkour. The internet and parkour have both grown practically in parallel. If it weren't for the internet, parkour would still be in the dark ages. Or would have at least trudged along at a snail's pace, as other lifestyle sports had, such as the early days of skateboarding, when the only nodes of community connection were magazines and VHS tapes. In the 30 years since parkour emerged, not only has the internet grown increasingly widespread, but several social media platforms have come and gone. These platforms' shifting algorithms have also influenced the popularity of different content styles. The growth of parkour and the public's perception of it, along with the morphing use and popularity of various media platforms, are intrinsically linked. We have instinctively adapted to any social media mould we can. This is not only to connect our community, but many are also inclined to expand beyond our bubble. We gravitate towards any platform where our content thrives, ensuring as many eyes as possible see us.

The Attention Olympics

As mentioned earlier, before user-based video platforms, forums were the primary online sources of parkour content and discourse. Once YouTube launched in February 2005, it quickly solidified itself as the go-to among the small handful of user-generated video hosting platforms. Early on, it was said that parkour was the most-watched and most uploaded sport on YouTube. It gradually became parkour's communal hub, and in doing so, parkour became far more accessible and reached more people as it was freed from the deep recesses of obscure forums with download links that risked putting your family computer out of commission. The forums were still reserved for

discussion, arguments and local meet-ups, but Facebook groups soon swooped in to replace them.

Cheesy solo edits and team action reels were the dominant video style for a while, but, as mentioned earlier, over time, we began to see many more down-to-earth, relaxed training and jam videos like *Cambridge Joy*.

One's subscriber count quickly became a sign of influence, both as an individual or as a team, in the parkour world. I remember thinking it was wild that the two most influential parkour channels, Daniel Ilabaca and Chase Armitage, were neck-and-neck, each with around 2,000 subscribers.

In 2012, the emergent smartphone app Instagram was acquired by Facebook for $1 billion. At the time, its owner, Mark Zuckerberg, was seen as crazy for investing so much in the small image-sharing app. Today, in 2026, Instagram's estimated brand value is between $114 billion and $228 billion. In 2013, Instagram began enabling users to upload videos up to 15 seconds long to compete with the then-popular app, Vine. Instagram quickly became a platform where parkourists shared quick video snacks that weren't suited to their YouTube projects. We soon realised that we could get more views and engagement from a minimal-effort short Instagram post than from our three-minute action edits on YouTube. So after a while, that's where most of the community began congregating and investing their time and energy.

Being popular in parkour media has always carried weight for many. Numerical markers of popularity, such as views, followers, and subscribers, serve as social capital that validates your skill level and notoriety, earning you respect within the community. It has also led to brand deals for some, generating a bit of income. We began to see that these new online metrics could create opportunities.

In 2010, I was invited to my first all-expenses-paid international parkour event in Denmark. At the time, it was a bizarre concept to be popular enough online for someone to fly you out to jam with other parkourists who had to pay to attend. I remember when my friends and I discovered how the event worked; we were unsure what to think. Before, we had only ever trained with others

for free, with no clear-cut hierarchy. It seemed strange and new that organisers were using us as a bargaining tool to entice members of the Danish community to buy tickets.

From then on, it became commonplace for popular parkourists to be used as a commodity by event organisers to lure people to their events. In 2012, the mega jams like FAM Jam and 4 The Love of Movement started popping up. You could often expect to see around three to four hundred people in attendance, and instead of just a few invited guest athletes, you would see a whole host of iconic online figures flown out to jam. It certainly seemed odd to some when events began offering segregated sleeping areas for invited athletes and for the people who paid to attend. Don't misunderstand me; both were akin to refugee camps, but bunk beds were undoubtedly a substantial upgrade from the proles with their multitiered hammock system haphazardly strung up on the scaffold set-up. Either that, or some assumed they had struck gold with a cushty space in the foam pit, only to wake up with back pain and wheezing lungs filled with dry foam particulates. In 2014, 4TLOM trialled a tiered system for invited athletes, divided into different-coloured tickets. If you had a golden ticket, for example, you were a VIP among the prestigious ranks of the German freerunning prince, Jason Paul, and you received all manner of perks. Whereas if you had a bronze ticket, you had to pay for your travel and were barely above the despicable unwashed masses of those who had paid entry for the event. I remember I had a silver ticket, while my brother Sacha had a bronze one. That can't have felt good. Although it was rare to be paid to attend jams as a guest, it was definitely a badge of importance in the weird hierarchical structure that began to emerge.

Human Billboards

Beyond communal respect and recognition, building a social media profile proved financially valuable for some. As the internet grew, companies began to realise they could advertise their products to target specific demographics through online profiles with large followings, rather than more traditional means such as TV, billboards,

trains, and bus stops. Instead of billboards for brand awareness, where anyone would drive past and see, they could invest in what you can imagine as an online billboard, except the traffic that drives past is people to whom the advertiser's products are better suited. The bigger the following, the bigger the billboard. If you have a minuscule following, you're essentially a poster or a business card. Why would any company invest in the equivalent of a business card, only for it to get lost amid the overwhelming noise of cyberspace?

As teams and individuals laboured to build larger followings on YouTube and Instagram and establish themselves as parkour influencers, more became incentivised to pay diligent attention to which content worked well and which didn't.

For the most part, Parkour media had always been aimed at people within our bubble. Many YouTube videos were casual training sessions, and on Instagram, they were the challenges from a day's training. Around 2010, a surge in people investing in better camera equipment marked the beginning of a new era in parkour videos. Parkour cinematographers emerged, including Scott Bass, Giles Campbell Longley, Sergio Cora Campos, Sacha Powell, and Toby Segar. There was a big boom in lifestyle videos, usually involving a jam or a trip, featuring lots of happy faces, good times and sunset shots with people in the foreground with their arms raised, as if to express, "Woooo! We're abroad without our parents!" And occasionally there would be some good quality movement, too. It was often shot and edited in a way that didn't do justice to the movement, with jarring mid-line cuts and experimental angles that didn't convey the scale of jumps. And it would all be tied together with the same post-rock or indie rock music. It was odd how our videos transitioned into what resembled music videos with a bit of parkour, rather than the classic parkour videos we were used to. However, as with the likes of *Cambridge Joy*, they depicted the character and adventurous lifestyle of parkourists more.

Eventually, we noticed a gradual decline in culture-heavy lifestyle and training videos as more creators began tailoring their output to appeal to audiences outside our community. Some realised they could amass a large number of views and followers by aligning with whatever is trending at the moment.

Neek Pandering

In 2012, a glide-cam-obsessed filmmaker from the US named Devin Graham (AKA Devin Supertramp) collaborated with parkourist, Ronnie Shalvis, to make the video *Assassin's Creed Meets Parkour in Real Life*. Let's not beat around the bush; it was essentially mediocre parkour in a mediocre Ezio Auditore costume. Despite this, the video quickly became one of the most viewed parkour videos on YouTube. At the time of writing, the video has a staggering 72 million views. Despite the featured movement being especially underwhelming at the time, it demonstrated that you could latch onto whatever was trending and rake in views regardless of whether you were any good.

In the years that followed, Devin Supertramp collaborated with more parkourists for a few more Assassin's Creed videos, one of which now boasts 111 million views. Ronnie Shalvis, among others, knuckled down and committed themselves to what became a new archetype of parkour video. If there were a video game, movie or indeed any new trend that parkour could be loosely tied to, they would make a video around it.

Shalvis made videos in which he dressed up as the Mario Bros., Red Dead Redemption, Spider-Man, Santa Claus, Star Wars, Dying Light, Super Smash Bros., Venom, The Legend of Zelda, The Matrix, Black Panther, Deadpool, Final Fantasy, aliens, and Mirror's Edge. I kid you not, there's even a video called *Super Hero Soccer*, which is exactly how it sounds—a bunch of full-grown American adult goofballs, likely virgins, in cheap superhero costumes doing trick shots with some crummy CGI. At least the cosplay convention people put some effort into it. Shalvis also exploited trends like Ninja Warrior, Black Friday, and, no joke... even fidget spinners! I was curious to see how he managed to tie that concept into parkour, but I didn't dare watch, primarily out of fear of losing brain cells. (edit: After much deliberation, for the sake of the book and my journalistic integrity, I mustered up the courage to watch the video, and sure enough, my fears were confirmed. Two men in their late twenties are doing mediocre flips on grass whilst spinning fidget spinners. It is beyond tragic, and I wouldn't wish an A Clockwork Orange-style forced viewing of the video on even my worst enemies. I doubt I will

ever fully recover from viewing this travesty. I hope you appreciate my noble sacrifice for the sake of this book. I feel like I need to take a shower.)

In 2016, Pokémon saw a major resurgence thanks to the new smartphone game Pokémon Go. I never wasted my time with it, but many of you did. Kie Willis once even interrupted our training session to go to a *hot spot* to catch a Snorlax or something. Pokémon Go rapidly became a massive worldwide craze, so of course, every gimpy parkourist jumped at the chance to exploit the hype. If you search *Pokémon Parkour* on YouTube, you will have an endless scroll of the most disgraceful thumbnails and titles you've ever seen. Calen Chan from Utah collaborated with Devin Supertramp for *Pokémon Go Meets Parkour*, which clocked up 43 million views, despite Pikachu looking like a fiendish crack addict in the thumbnail. I hope Calen was paid for this work, since around this time Devin was banking an estimated $250k a year from ad revenue alone.

But there is still the worst offender of them all. A dyed fringed Canadian geek who has exploited virtually every superhero fiction movie, anime, video game, and any transient trend you can think of. Of course, I'm talking about none other than Nick Provost. If you haven't heard of him, I wouldn't be too surprised. It's clear that his target audience is nerdy fiction-obsessed children or very sheltered, possibly home-schooled and under-socialised weeb teenagers, rather than the parkour community or any grounded member of civilised society with both feet in reality. So there's a fair chance your YouTube algorithm has luckily shielded you from his abhorrent atrocities featuring sprung floor flips in every conceivable fictional character costume.

Many people mistakenly believe Storror is the most subscribed parkour channel on YouTube. At the time of writing this, Nick Provost's channel has 26.9 million subscribers. This is more than double what Storror has. Provost's channel dwarfs any other parkour channel by a long shot. The most popular parkour creator makes what we do look like a childish gimmick that isn't cool enough to stand on its own without clinging to Spiderman, Pikachu, Captain America, or whatever is the prevailing flavour of the month.

As I've mentioned before, we've had a hard time prying our culture out from the dark depths of lamedom. It's been a struggle to promote a public image of parkour that is more than dweebs trying to imitate The Matrix or ninjas. Many of us recognise that what we do is cool and strive to convey that through culturally rich media. Needless to say, *The Office* and their *Hardcore Parkour* skit from 2009 took the wind out of our sails early doors. But as I've said, for them, it was easy pickings; we were a budding new sport that was an internet sensation, and the most prominent videos from that era portrayed us as The Matrix-obsessed, wall-running ninja dudes who all took ourselves too seriously. I thought, and still think, that the skit was hilarious. Dwight Schrute riding Andy Bernard like a bull whilst yelling "PARKOUR" will never fail to squeeze a chuckle from me. But to our misfortune, everyone else found it funny too. This single short comedic skit rapidly became a long-lasting meme. I think the effects hit North America much harder than in Europe and elsewhere. It became a regular occurrence for people to yell "HARDCORE PARKOUR" from their car window as they drove past a group of people training. As if it wasn't bad enough already with dickheads shouting "DO A BACKFLIP" from across the road. Even sixteen years later, The Office's parkour meme still lives on online today in various forms and iterations. A demonstration of true internet staying power. Although it sucks for us. It only makes our job of pushing back against this perceived lameness harder when our own creators become increasingly popular by producing parkour content for babies, latching onto fiction and cheap, tacky, short-lived trends. It does nothing but solidify us amongst the ranks of hobby-horsing, scootering, Quidditch and Frisbee golf.

Today, do most people find parkour cool? Cool is a nebulous concept. Whether something is cool or not will depend on who you're asking. An eleven-year-old boy from Ohio is probably going to think Ronnie Shalvis jumping around dressed as a Jedi with a CGI lightsaber is really fucking cool. A thirteen-year-old from Ottawa, watching Nick Provost doing flash kick wall flips with a superhero landing on a sprung floor in a gym dressed as Goku, will likely think it's the coolest thing ever.

When fretting about parkour being broadly perceived as cool, you must consider the demographic. I often find myself imagining how skateboarders in their twenties and people from other cool subcultures would perceive certain aspects of parkour. If they only have the above to judge from, they will probably think parkour the corniest thing on earth. However, if they have only seen any of Kipa, FifthUnit, Fé, Schlappen, Farang, Gefam videos or anything hosted by The Commons, they might be inclined to think it's pretty cool.

Some of the FifthUnit guys told me a while back about some friends of theirs who mainly know parkour through watching Storror videos. They thought it was cool that the FifthUnit guys did it too. Storror's demographic is pretty broad. The people who recognise us in the street in the UK, and indeed most places we go, span all age groups. I've even had numerous men and women in their fifties and sixties tell me they love watching our videos every Monday. We've had plenty of people tell us that the whole family gets together every Monday evening to watch our latest video. I'm not saying that boomers are cool, or that cosy family time viewings are cool (although the thought of it is heartwarming); I'm saying that Storror somehow seem to successfully pull a wider net of people who think parkour is cool. And that's kind of cool.

Parkour's demographic can be broad because, as we know, parkour is pretty broad. It is quite malleable as a medium for content. Suppose our primary concern is to attract more people to our sport, encouraging them to attend our gyms and classes, and to purchase our clothing and watch our pay-per-view films and competitions. In that case, I think there's probably room enough for more perceptions of *cool* than just our own. I'd rather watch Joe Scandrett's hair grow than a Nick Provost video. But conversely, little Billie from Wolverhampton can't wait to get home from school to watch the latest video of Ronnie Shalvis in a padded gym, speaking to the camera like a kid's TV presenter before doing an aerial on a sprung floor while spinning two fidget spinners dressed as Charmander. And little Billie might then scream at their mum to take them to the local parkour gym to learn to do aerials themselves. And maybe little Billie will one day grow out of X-Men, Sonic The Hedgehog, Pikachu and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and discover Kipa, Scruffy, Fé, Storror

and Gefam videos, and later buy themselves some of their clothing. And who knows, maybe little Billie will stick with the sport long enough to form their own team and contribute to the culture with some cool videos. This is precisely what happened with Aiden Knox from the UK. He got hooked on Nick Provost's videos in his youth, which catapulted him into his parkour journey. Aiden went on to join the team Brewman, which became a staple in the UK scene for a time. But alternatively, little Billie might realise it's far more lucrative to make the same style of videos that got them into parkour in the first place. And thus, the cycle continues. But the fact remains that these videos are undoubtedly attracting people to the sport, and they serve a purpose, whether or not most of us active participants respect them.

The moral of the story might be just to create the content you think is cool, and if it helps to outweigh the content that you believe is uncool, then great. But despite many of us cringing at their mere existence, maybe the nerdy YouTube videos aimed at kids have their place in the parkour content ecosystem. Because after all, there are many nerds out there. And some of them are even kind of cool. Just look at Darryl Stingley...

But when times are hard, it can be easy for some to abandon their principles and fall into what works for the algorithm to secure that sweet YouTube Adsense money. But even when something is produced authentically, there are still potential casualties of *cool*.

Vertigo-Prone Muggle Pandering: GOHSSHWA

Aside from the emergence of Instagram, the short three-minute training video became less prominent when YouTube changed its algorithm to favour longer videos. This was an attempt to differentiate YouTube from Instagram and compete with TV and other streaming platforms, such as Netflix. This was when vlogs started occurring. Suddenly, parkourists were copying other YouTubers and filming themselves awkwardly chatting to a camera for vlogs, essentially padding out the timeline with lifestyle filler between the occasional jump.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before parkour's attention economy shifted towards longer vlogs that exploited interactions and altercations with police and security, usually in countries with lax trespass laws. This, coupled with videos designed to evoke feelings of fear in a vertigo-stricken non-parkour audience, spawned a new breed of viral parkour content.

Because parkour is mostly practised in urban areas, our training regularly takes place on private property. Living in the UK and most of Europe, it doesn't take long before one becomes somewhat desensitised to interactions with the police and security. In my first couple of years of training, when parkour was less known to the police and public, we would often have our details taken by officers twice a day. We all learn to deal with it in respectful, amicable ways and just move on to the next spot, usually with very little fuss. Or, sometimes, we're able to calmly convince them that what we're doing is a harmless and controlled form of "exercise" that's generally not destructive of property. They occasionally allow us to continue at our own risk.

A great feature of how many people train parkour is that we learn to keep a cool head at heights. Through gradual exposure, many of us become capable of performing a wide range of tasks and skills well within our ability at height, in a composed and controlled manner, recognising that death may be on the cards if focus and control slip. Most non-practitioners do not encounter these experiences in their daily lives, so they struggle to grasp the simple concepts of risk vs. consequence that many of us face every day, which builds trust in our decision-making. Videos showcasing even the simplest things at height serve as exciting little windows into our world, eliciting a heart-stopping emotional response in the lay public. Although walking beside a massive drop at the edge of a building may evoke minimal feelings of fear in an experienced parkourist, a non-practitioner's palms might begin to sweat upon viewing this in a POV video on a phone screen.

With many of us realising this easy view hack, many veered toward Urbex and roof-topping content to capitalise on these vertigo-prone viewers. Many shifted their entire creative output to getting up

onto high stuff and arguing with authorities when they inevitably get caught. When you could get far more online engagement by posting a video of yourself with a selfie stick up a crane, why bother recording and posting hard parkour?

In the UK, this was further proliferated in 2014 by the Channel 4 documentary *Don't Look Down*. The show followed a timid parkourist from Southampton named James Kingston after he gained YouTube notoriety by hanging one-handed from a high arm of a crane over the waters of a Harbour. Following this, Kingston was even invited onto The Joe Rogan Experience. Rogan has also hosted the likes of world-renowned free solo climber Alex Honnold. Someone so dense and scared of heights as Rogan didn't seem able to separate the two people in his mind; one being an elite athlete who performs long and exposed, highly difficult climbs up megalithic rock faces higher than any skyscraper in the world, and one who simply hangs on things. James's actions seemed on par with Alex's to Joe, and the same likely goes for the average Joe with the same butt-clenching aversion to heights.

Around this time, there was a massive influx of parkourists filming mundane, pedestrian activities at height. It became commonplace for many to sit on the edge of buildings and take photos of their legs dangling above the distant ground below. Noticing this trend, the Colorado team, Myrm, came up with a satirical new sport called *GOHSSHWA* (Getting On top of High Stuff and Standing, Hanging or Walking Around). They wrote an article on their blog about how it's "the up and coming cool sport for cool dude reckless teens." It was essentially a social commentary on how it's an easy, cheap way to exploit the basic skills learned in parkour. Myrm's Dylan Baker had long been performing challenging and bold parkour at height. He even innovated and popularised the trend of descending multi-storey car parks. It was laughable to him how anyone with the bare minimum of parkour skill could pick up a camera, quickly build up online notoriety, and become an internet sensation by exploiting banal stuff at height.

There's a fantastic clip of Alex Honnold poking fun at the parkour and roof-topping scene, where, atop a tall building, he jokes,

"Maybe I should pop a handstand right here and become an internet sensation."

What these GOHSSHWA guys do, compared to the likes of Alex Honnold or Alain Robert (AKA The French Spider-Man), is simply cheap child's play. Free soloing is climbing without any safety equipment. Alain Robert has free-soloed many of the world's skyscrapers and has consequently been arrested around 170 times. Honnold ascended the Freerider route on El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. And then there's the Canadian alpinist, Marc-Andre Leclerc, who was known for icy solo ascents up the most treacherous mountain routes. He was often climbing up vertical or overhanging ice thousands of feet up, aided by nothing but his crampons and ice axes. He climbed on unpredictable surfaces in highly volatile environments. To those who have honed incredible skills climbing at height for decades, it must seem desperate to see a group of self-proclaimed "climbers" clickbaiting taking the stairs or elevator up to a roof, hanging from a balcony, a crane or an I beam, or simply sitting and dangling their feet over the edge, especially when you don't have to possess any real skill to do so. There's an ITV This Morning interview with James Kingston where he says, "When I'm sat somewhere high, I'm like, cool, I'm not actually scared of this anymore."

Yeah, bro, because you're just sitting somewhere high and chilling! You're not performing any skill! You're essentially engaged in a sedentary act! How can people like James Kingston live with themselves and feel proud about their achievements, when there are heroes like the rock climber and alpinist, Marc-André Leclerc, who have honed incredible skills, alongside a seemingly inhuman ability to stay composed and focused whilst performing them in extremely exposed and precariously unpredictable environments?

Ally Law is a lad also hailing from Southampton, UK, who rose to fame by doing *GOHSSHWA* along with all manner of Urbex-esque YouTube trends. One of which was his 'overnight challenge' series, where he and a group of his yob mates attempt to stay in various commercial premises after closing hours and get into all manner of hijinks.

Ally was an overweight Runescape addict when he found parkour. And I assume shortly after he realised he had no talent, he gravitated towards creating *GOHSSHWA* content, and capitalised on all the run-ins with authorities that came with it. Due to the UK's lax trespassing laws, these YouTubers felt unstoppable, although Ally certainly flew far too close to the sun with his urban mischief.

Ally and his merry band of cretinous louts accrued numerous fines, over one hundred hours of community service, many court hearings, bans, a charge of burglary (he didn't burgle anyone, but they got him on theft of one teabag, which demonstrates how desperate they were to make an example of him), and several injunctions that restricted him from entering certain areas of London. The court even tried to restrict him from having a phone to prevent him from uploading.

Sure enough, this era began to wane when Ally's YouTube channel suddenly became demonetised. He could no longer make money from his videos because YouTube deemed his content unsuitable for advertisers, leaving only his shirts, with his catchphrase, *It's a madness* across the front, to maintain his livelihood. Not only was Ally Law's channel blacklisted, but so was the rosy red-cheeked Harry Gallagher's (AKA Nightscape), who had veered from parkour to create similar viral hungry Urbex and roof-topping content, along with other niche escapades, such as infiltrating an airport hangar and clambering around on a jumbo jet, which subsequently led to his home being raided by the police and all his devices getting confiscated for evidence.

We at Storror were also slapped by the cruel hand of demonetisation. At the time, we certainly flirted more with that genre of viral content. In some cases, we jumped straight into bed with it. We shamelessly clickbaited police and security, undoubtedly increasing the volume of content with heights and amassing a large following in the process. It's hard to deny that our first rooftop "escape" POV is the video that propelled us toward our first million subscribers. And once something does well, we too doubled down. However, a clear difference between us and the others was that we were doing parkour at height, rather than taking the stairs of construction sites up to the roof to film ourselves with a selfie stick,

standing around, like "Rah! I'm on a high thing. Are your palms sweating yet? LIKE AND SUBSCRIBE!!!" We were unmistakably still a parkour channel, whereas with the others, the lines were blurred.

Our feature-length documentary, Roof Culture Asia, featured us testing our mental limits by doing jumps and lines on the skyscrapers of Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Seoul. There's a short section in the film's intro where I distinguish between the selfie stick posers and us—reclaiming rooftop parkour as a rigorous and fulfilling mental pursuit. Regardless of who was more legitimate than who (we were), all of our YouTube accounts got demonetised. This was just when YouTube seemed like a viable source of income in itself, rather than simply the best way to spread our creative work, to sell merch, and wrangle the occasional brand deal.

In 2019, YouTube updated its user guidelines and implemented a rigorous crackdown on videos with dangerous and harmful content. The stink caused by our channels put parkour on YouTube's naughty list. Even though Law and Gallagher's videos could at most times scarcely be characterised as parkour, we were all tarred with the same brush. James Kingston stopped making rooftopping videos and turned to gaming content instead. (Although a crucial element that earns YouTube gamers their following is having a charismatic personality, of which Kingston had not been blessed with even a crumb of.) Night Scape and Ally Law, having already distanced themselves from parkour media, began clinging to other popular YouTube trends.

There was a massive inconsistency in the videos that were demonetised. A video we shot teaching parkour to refugees in Athens was even ineligible for monetisation. It was as if the entire channel had been blacklisted. The future for aspiring parkour channels everywhere began to look bleak, as we at Storror were viewed by many as the trailblazers, demonstrating that YouTube was another viable option for making a living in our sport. This phase of parkour content may have ruined it by blacklisting parkour for the foreseeable future. It put a roadblock in the way of anyone who wanted to make YouTube their career and wasn't prepared to sell their soul and prance around in a Pikachu onesie. Today, London's Team Phat struggle to stay motivated to continue pursuing YouTube, as many of their videos

are demonetised or age-restricted, which severely limits the algorithmic push they receive.

Off the back of the *GOHSSHWA* era, in order for YouTube to run ads on parkour videos, we have to walk a very fine line of making entertaining content while also staying within the platform's creator guidelines. Even if we aren't overtly exploiting danger or interactions with authorities, we can't show the things that naturally happen during a day of training. The simple training videos at ground level simply aren't enough to keep viewers engaged, so parkour YouTubers are forced to depict it in ways that gamify it or place it in a context with a clear, understandable goal. We at Storror have had to continuously adapt to support the seven of us, yet a video that seems relatively banal will still be age-restricted and punished by the algorithm, thus affecting our monthly income. But it's either that or recreating stunts from the Sonic the Hedgehog movies with foam blocks on an air track.

For as long as I can remember, our community has always been concerned about the public's perception of parkour. I thought it was essential to maintain the perception that our culture was inclusive and accessible, but above all, cool. I didn't think it was getting any easier with those pandering to kids by doing parkour dressed up as Pokémon, dinosaurs, Spider-Man, Mario and Assassin's Creed. However, many of us were simply pandering in a different way. And potentially with worse consequences.

I wasn't a big fan of the switch to boring, drawn-out vlog content in general, but I thought it at least served as a chance to showcase more of the process behind a lot of the dangerous stuff we do—a platform to broadcast more context behind the scenes. Roof Culture Asia and the BTS videos that followed were, in a nutshell, precisely that. It showcased the spectacle of parkour on the stage of life or death, whilst providing insight into our rational and methodical approach, and making it clear that replicating this without years of experience is reckless. However, despite these intentions, it's nowhere near as simple in reality. Some will always see what they want to see and turn a blind eye to the reasonable and rational, opting instead to rush towards what's expedient and eye-catching.

Although parkour with high consequences can be immensely intrinsically valuable, as it tests sound judgment, composure, and willpower, it can become dangerous for younger viewers when the extrinsic reward of online fame acts as a carrot on a stick, influencing that willpower.

I realised our negative influence was becoming too much when a handful of my younger students asked me for good roof spots around Brighton. Of course, I reeled off the classic spiel, demanding that they had no business taking their training up to an environment with high consequences, as they hadn't first learnt all the ways in which mistakes can happen at ground level with low consequence. They hadn't built their ability or known enough about their ability to make rational judgment calls on which their life depended.

On the 16th of August 2022, Hong Kong's newspaper The Standard featured the front page headline, "Roof-stunt teen plunges to death." The seventeen-year-old Yeung Hoi-Kit fell fifteen storeys from the high-rise building, Tsim Sha Tsui Mansions. This was the roof where we filmed Toby's front flip gap for Roof Culture Asia. When I read that parkour was mentioned in the first paragraph of the story, I was somewhat sceptical, as in the past, the news has often wrongly associated our sport with such tragedies, perhaps in an effort to sound more alarmist. And sure enough, the front page featured a photo of Max Cave's stride from Roof Culture Asia that went viral. However, my scepticism was instantly shattered when I saw a photo of a loose Vans Ultra Range shoe that must have come off on landing.

When the most influential parkour channels gain success by showcasing parkour at height and altercations with authority, it doesn't take a genius to guess what some impressionable young viewers and parkour beginners will gravitate towards, potentially with fatal consequences. On the other hand, it can lead some to believe that parkour is something only accessible to a hyper-masculine, reckless and elite minority.

Although this era of videos may have helped shift a proportion of the public's perception of parkour from something lame to something cool, renegade, and countercultural, for many viewers, it

also made it seem too dangerous, inaccessible, and somewhat exclusive to young men with a death wish.

Societal views on risk-taking are a mess. Risk-taking activities are often viewed as stupid and frivolous unless they are deeply established in mainstream sports, such as the UFC or American football. In parkour, this is evident in practically any comment section of a roof gap that has received even a smidge of viral status. Many parkourists online are fairly unhelpful in the uphill battle to contextualise the positives of risk-taking. Social media algorithms have pushed parkourists to perpetuate society's messy views on the sport, exploiting them for personal gain. And as for James Kingston, Ally Law and Harry Gallegher, as soon as the opportunity for personal gain dries up, they stop urbex, rooftopping and high-consequence parkour altogether, and divert their attention to the next best thing to keep the train rolling, albeit with a precipitous drop in subscribers. The adventure didn't seem worth their time anymore if it couldn't be leveraged for views.

The Social Media Scientists: Puppets of the algorithm

Instagram is now undoubtedly parkour's communal hub. Despite everything being much more scattered and unorganised than the forums of yesteryear, people use it to upload their training, promote their products and events, share and prop up other parkourists, and start discussions in stories and comment sections. Instagram, in essence, works as a kind of town hall for the community. Even when people release video content on YouTube, most are likely to hear about it on Instagram. However, the idea began to emerge that the number of followers one has directly translates into income. Many strive to be the human billboard brands want to collaborate with, assuming that the higher their following is, the more brand deals will magically appear in their inbox. Moreover, many people place significant emotional stock in views and followers, believing they're intrinsically linked to their value, self-image and social status.

Instagram is, without a doubt, designed to make you feel good when receiving notifications. It's designed to keep you on the app for as long as possible, giving you little dopamine hits from likes, comments, and followers, while also using its algorithm to spoon-feed content that'll keep you scrolling indefinitely. This isn't all bad, as it depends highly on the accounts you follow and what value their content has to you. It also depends on how much control you have over your monkey brain to put your phone away when you know your time is better spent on something more worthwhile. If you do parkour and mainly follow parkour accounts, amazing and groundbreaking things appear on your feed every day, inspiring you for your next session. This in itself is a great thing. After a training session, we can upload the catch of the day so the rest of the community can see it and interact with it. It can feel like you're contributing to the community and its creative progression.

Instagram has a faster turnaround than the classic YouTube video, where we typically save up clips over longer periods before releasing them in a longer edit. I remember the feeling of releasing a new video on my first YouTube channel. Videos where I had worked hard collecting clips for months. Once it was uploaded, I would bask in the praise and validation from others. With the expedient nature of Instagram and its shorter, bite-sized content, you could get that same dopamine hit from uploading self-congratulatory content every single day if you wanted to. Due to that lightning-fast turnaround, I feel the pace of ideas within the parkour hive mind accelerated faster than ever before. The skill level seems to be improving exponentially. However, the algorithm can again push some to habitually create content that erodes authenticity.

I think many of us are incentivised to post regularly and grow our accounts for three reasons: first, we believe there is an intrinsic link between followers and making a living from the sport. However, the golden formula tends to look a little like this:

Phase 1. Accumulate followers
Phase 2. ????
Phase 3. Profit!!

The second reason is that we feel good when we receive notifications and praise, not only from peers but also from strangers, which helps fend off feelings of low social status and low self-esteem. And the third is that we wish to stay relevant in a fast-paced, fast-evolving community of goldfish-brained people. These three are all reasons that require unpacking, mainly because there may be some interplay among them that makes us pretty delusional and leads us to take actions that don't always align with what we desire and value. When gaining attention becomes the highest priority, our other values can become clouded. For some, this can corrode a healthy relationship with parkour, turning it into a never-ending numbers game.

Because humans are evolutionarily intensely social animals, our standing within social settings has a powerful influence on our sense of identity. We evolved to care about social cohesion and our standing within social groups because it was necessary for survival, given our reliance on our tribe's support. Banishment from the tribe for our early hominid ancestors was akin to certain death in their predator-dense environment. Solo hunter-gatherer homo sapiens would struggle to survive long without support. Conversely, a higher rank in the tribe meant greater safety, better food, a better chance of reproduction, and less risk of rejection by the tribe. This means that, as a species, we are hardwired to care about what other people think of us.

However, just because it was evolutionarily adaptive doesn't mean it doesn't come with its pitfalls in modernity. And with social media platforms connecting us all, the "tribe" has expanded to an unnatural extreme. Today, instances of social rejection are not a death sentence, yet our minds and bodies still react to them as if they are. Modern tech giants like Instagram can exploit these hardwired vulnerabilities, anchoring us to their platforms by making us addicted to a constant stream of dopaminergic treats that aim to affirm or improve our social standing.

Never before in human history have we had such accurate metrics for whether what we do is liked or not. We receive clear numerical feedback on whether people enjoy our posts. And as the internet links all of humanity together, we are no longer a small band

of no more than one hundred hominids. Suddenly, we are exposed to total strangers' opinions on what we do, and those opinions hold relevance to us, whether good or bad. I'm sure many of you have spent longer than you'd like to admit arguing with total strangers on the other side of the planet who you will never meet. Rather than caring about the opinions of only those within our small circle in the real world, of whom we know and respect, we care about how our influence penetrates into the rest of the world through cyberspace.

For parkour, some of us may toil endlessly to figure out which content drives better numbers and filter out anything that doesn't. That post where you did that very technical traverse and dyno didn't do so well in terms of engagement. Neither the challenge with the technical foot placement, nor the new flip in the gym that you were stoked about. Although they were challenging, fun and fulfilling, they both seemed to go unnoticed. Sure, it may have gotten some appreciation in the comments from friends and others you respect, but what's that worth if the numbers are down?! Then you may refrain not only from uploading these things but also from spending any energy on them entirely. On the other hand, that slow-motion jump over a fountain, where it looks like you were going to fall in, did exceedingly well, so now it makes sense to strive to do more along those lines. This is how audience capture warps parkour and our relationship to it. And it's a faceless audience when all that matters is the numbers. For those who are consciously or subconsciously beholden to views and followers, days of training turn into content-farming expeditions.

Instagram is one of the more limbic social media platforms, meaning the content that excels is usually the kind that elicits an emotional response in the viewer's monkey brain. Content of a scary, funny, sexy, infuriating, cute, infuriatingly cute, relatable, and sadistic nature all tickle the monkey brain. As more of us started realising this, many people's content began to warp to accommodate the monkey-brained masses. The *parkour social media scientists* emerged to figure out how to wrangle the maximum amount of attention—testing hypotheses and tweaking their methods in the pursuit of higher numbers. As more parkourists began dropping their principles of authenticity and

growing their platforms exponentially, it became more of a norm, opening the door for others to follow suit. A hazy pursuit of clout and financial success bludgeoned the authenticity of many creators. Appeasing the algorithm has led so many parkourists to ditch any remaining individuality, ultimately resulting in an obedient flock of NPCs.

The number of followers you have has become less a measurement of respect, pre-eminence and influence within parkour's communal hub, and instead more about how attentive you are as a social media scientist. The yardstick for what is good in parkour has been snapped on the social media scientist's knee. For many, pushing yourself in the sport you enjoy isn't the goal anymore. The sport isn't even important anymore, except for the bare minimum of skills required to execute a specific cringey idea. For an increasing number of parkourists, the sport has become merely a vehicle leveraged for success in the Attention Olympics. It became a numbers game.

It seems that many believe you need to become a meme to make a living from parkour. When scrolling your feed, what used to be clips of your favourite parkourists throwing down, transformed to your favourite parkourists doing a mixture of strange comedic skits, pranks, niche trends and easy slow-motion high stuff, occasionally with a weird air-form to appear more uncontrolled for a heightened sense of jeopardy in a bid to pander to the layperson. When gym and fitness content got a massive boom, many of us exploited our baseline skills again, doing all kinds of backflip burpee nonsense. We saw a rapid increase in weird prank videos; sometimes as cheap as doing the classic webster front, ending up sitting on a bench, except they would land next to an unsuspecting member of the public (usually a hot girl to tick another "viral potency" box!). And their reaction would be like, "OMG! u dId a fLiP! iNcReDiBlE! I dIDn't eXpEKt! MuCh iMpReSs!!"

Much of the time, it's unclear how a post going viral benefits the person who uploaded it. And sadly, you are rarely rewarded with many more followers, especially when the re-sharing accounts freeboot your content without giving credit. Even when credited by these accounts, you would often only see a marginal boost to your following. For example, Chloe Reynolds had a clip shared on

Instagram's official account in January 2026 (the most followed account on the platform, whether botted or not), which got 87 million views, 446k likes and 26k shares in a week, only for her to gain a measly and disproportionate 8,000 new followers. And when you do gain a massive influx of followers, many of them unfollow when they aren't appeased with similar content down the line. Or they jump ship when the short-lived novelty of what they enjoyed about your content wears off. You see it with so many accounts that went viral; their following receives a marked boost, then it plateaus and hovers for a while, or plummets in a mass exodus of unsatisfied viewers.

The relationship between having a high following and financial opportunities is not as clear as many think. I have 340k followers, and my email inbox is just as littered with spam, phishing schemes, and random bullshit as anyone else's. Even Joe Scandrett, one of the most-followed parkourists on Instagram with 3 million followers, is not receiving enough opportunities to achieve financial stability. Joe has laudably amassed his superstar-like following simply by posting unadulterated, jaw-dropping, high-consequence and innovative parkour. He is one of the realest in the scene, and it's great for parkour to have such a great representative. However, his following is massively disproportionate to his income.

On the flip side, I'm unsure what opportunities some can expect from becoming a meme. I doubt many big companies will call you up for their high-budget ad campaign when you're the guy who slaps a girl's arse before doing a rudimentary flip...

The Funnelling of Culture

Saint Petersburg's Kirya Kolesnikov was an extraordinarily talented athlete. He was among the top Russians ahead of the game, pushing the speciality of powerful and well-connected complex flips. He was a dominating force at competitions. I'm unsure when the switch occurred, but Kirya's videos went from the above and, over time, morphed into a childish and sexist laughing stock. Laughing at him, not with him. I don't know if Russian humour is just different to other cultures, but most people I know saw it as cheap and tasteless trash,

bereft of any signs of comedy. Kirya's videos, to this day, consist of unimaginative skits and choreographed public pranks, most of which involve his friends and girlfriend as plants (which, if you follow him and see more than two or three posts, surely you realise she's the same woman from the last and the veil is lifted). He will shamelessly post the same prank format repeatedly, with minor variations, often using the same music that performs well on the algorithm. The repeats with minor tweaks show he has no respect for his current following, and instead demonstrate he cares only about fishing for new followers, not about pleasing those already on board. Much of his slop involves flirting with someone's girlfriend, then using parkour to escape the enraged boyfriend. Another of his continually rehashed formats is acting as if he's about to jump into water, then a "bystander" reactively intervenes, leading to them falling in. And, of course, pretending to be blind. Again, all these pranks are choreographed using reused plants with appalling acting.

In a Callum Tip from 2018, in which I bemoan the state of parkour on social media, Kirya commented, saying it's the stupidest thing he's ever read and that parkour is dead in Russia. It's unpopular, and the opportunities to make a living from it are very few and far between. I couldn't help but sympathise—until I remembered that it's practically the same everywhere! The problem of parkourists struggling to make a living through content is not limited to Russia. Granted, Russia's whole economy is on the back foot due to the country's history, although likely more its current leadership, but it's very rare that even some of the top 'pros' from all over the world, with oodles of followers, aren't relying on a second job to pay their rent. Even for those living under the hegemonic global superpower, the United States of America. As for parkour being dead in Russia, does Kirya really believe that his content will act as the kiss of life?

A more recent phenomenon is the rise in AI-generated parkour content. A few have realised that Facebook has recently changed its monetisation policy for short-form videos. It now pays creators based on the performance of their posts rather than through a share of ad revenue. Thus, a new cash cow has emerged for parkourists, and those privy to the fertile ground leapt in full hog and began uploading

multiple short, low-effort clips a day. Not only are they dumping their entire backlog of viral potentials, but some are using Sora and other AI software to "enhance" their clips for maximal engagement.

Around 2015 and 2016, Facebook was still used by the parkour community because its algorithm would push our videos, encouraging more people to follow our athlete pages and Instagram accounts. The occasional job opportunity still came through these athlete pages, too. Facebook has since become a desert, and its denizens are furious boomers. In the 2010s, parents of millennials and older Gen Z-ers felt obligated to join the platform to stay up to date with what their kids were up to, and then somewhere along the line, we left Facebook in droves for Instagram and Twitter, leaving behind an archive of all our old cringe first-person statuses, edgy and politically-incorrect jokes and photos that definitely won't come back to haunt us down the line... But we also left our poor parents to fester amongst themselves. Facebook is now a place where our parents become enraged daily. They seem to lack the critical thinking skills to avoid becoming increasingly politically radicalised and duped by all manner of obvious AI slop. And it's the AI parkour slop that seems to do so incredibly well on the dying platform. Oftentimes, regular parkour clips alone are enough to rage-bait boomers into a fiendish frenzy. Different iterations of the "I hope you fall and break your neck" comments always tend to be posted by a decrepit, hate-filled, lead-poisoned boomer. So it's not too hard to imagine how an AI-altered parkour clip of a nasty bail or horrendous fall whips them up into a cacophonous chorus of vicious vitriol in the comments. But for the parkourists plundering this internet dead-space, engagement is engagement, regardless of how much of it is venom from vindictive wine mums and racist gammons who can't tell their arse from their elbow, let alone an AI video from a real one.

A friend told me he made €30,000 in one month monetising AI content on Facebook. That is an unheard of amount of money for short-form content. He said he wouldn't want to upload this kind of content on Instagram, where the parkour community resides, but it would be stupid to turn down such a ridiculous passive income from exploiting boomers on Facebook. However, we have begun to see a slow trickle of AI parkour clips on our Instagram feeds. Which was

fairly predictable, considering the all-too-tantalising viral potential to further grow their accounts. AI slop on the internet dead-space of Facebook is perhaps fair game, as it seems like throwing hunks of shit down a well for money to be spat back out. (Even though the AI bails may be leading old people to believe that parkour is far more dangerous than it is, but perhaps that's a drop in the pan in comparison to them seeing fake videos of hundreds of refugee boats arriving on the UK's shores.) But it's certainly upsetting to see this slop on Instagram, the parkour communal hub where we go for inspiration, communication, and to contribute to the creative progress of our sport. As we use AI more and the technology becomes increasingly convincing, not only will our feeds be further polluted with garbage, but the public may also begin to doubt the authenticity of our real videos. If Redditors back in 2011 were doubting whether Toby's double kong in Denmark was real, you can bet normies will question elite-level parkour clips as AI video software evolves. And since these models' capabilities improve based on the content their users feed them, the more we use them for AI parkour slop, the more we're training them to potentially replace us.

As for Facebook monetisation being a viable option for parkourists to make a sustainable living, perhaps we shouldn't get our hopes up too much. I predict that it's a bubble that will soon burst. Facebook knows it's on the rocks and is aggressively trying to attract young creators and viewers to its platform to help resuscitate it. This is not dissimilar to when TikTok's algorithm pushed new users' content to keep them on the platform. But that eventually petered out as the platform rose to prominence. I don't imagine Facebook's investment in creators will magically bring more young people to the platform. Millennials and Gen Zers will continue to only return to the app to sell old IKEA furniture on Facebook Marketplace. If anything, I can see creators posting and swiftly leaving straight after—like launching a grenade indiscriminately at a retirement home, and fleeing the scene, plugging their ears. And young people already have brain rot in abundance across other apps, so why would they add another one with a far more archaic user interface? Time may prove me wrong, but I suspect that, since Facebook's heyday has long passed, it will remain an unpopular social media platform, and

Facebook will eventually stop pumping so much money into its fruitless content monetisation program.

If we want parkour to be seen as a legitimate profession that can help more people make a living, turning it into a tasteless laughing stock for short-term personal gain is far from the best approach. It does nothing but perpetuate the public's perception that parkour is a trend that offers society nothing more than a way to latch onto other meme-like trends. It only demonstrates that the great thing we do isn't strong enough to stand alone.

My main gripe with this content is that if enough people fall prey to this trap, it'll overshadow the real representations of parkour that advance our sport as a legitimate practice and meaningful pursuit. The same goes for the Pikachu bullshit on YouTube. Not just for the public's perception but also for us—when we're scrolling through our feed in hopes of finding inspiration, we consistently come across cheap, viral-hungry eye cancer.

Perhaps I'm wrong, but I firmly believe that those who create meme-like content that exploits parkour skills and those who share authentic training clips are opposing forces in cultivating our industry and culture. Those doing what they love and pushing the sport are unperturbed by the numbers and the blessings of muggles—those who value the opinions and praise from those within our community above those of strangers. I consider this the long game—the path that will push the sport toward being respected by the masses as culturally strong, which is more likely to lead to a steady increase in public interest and parkour participation.

The other path is the short game; those who received praise from within our community, but the numbers weren't enough to satiate their self-esteem or bank balance. Then they adopt the mindset of the *social media scientist* and endeavour to exploit the algorithm at all costs, no matter how much it pulls them away from their authenticity and from what drew them to parkour in the first place.

In truth, it is the algorithm that has exploited them. Their psychology has been hacked, reducing them to puppets dancing to the drum of the algorithm. The dopaminergic treats transform parkour into a validation commodity, and if all fall prey to this trap, it will

funnel the culture into an edgeless joke. I do not believe this is how legitimate subcultures grow.

With the nerdy Nick Provost-style content, at least there is a more tangible pipeline from viewers to parkourists. With the cheap meme slop on Instagram Reels and TikTok, as well as the new emergence of AI parkour slop, the viewer-to-parkourist conversion rate seems far lower. (Some of Bob Reese's content is undoubtedly an exception to this for many reasons, chiefly as he regularly breaks down his process for landing cutting-edge tricks into digestible steps, making parkour understandable and more accessible. And, according to him, it also makes him *really happy*...)

As I've said, social media and the internet as a whole have been such a crucial asset in the growth of our sport. However, I firmly believe that if we fail to control its ever-increasing hold over us, we will cease to grow and instead regress. In a podcast interview hosted by Flynn Disney, Daniel Ilabaca says that if he were a kid and stumbled upon the parkour of today, he wouldn't be interested. I wholly believe the same for my younger self. I think teenage Callum would have been entirely deterred upon seeing the bulk of parkour media that pierces out of the community.

Once again, to help our industry, increased participation is paramount. There are currently not enough people participating in parkour to support most of our top grassroots brands, gyms and athletes. In an ideal world, absolute units like Joe Scandrett, Lisa Schneider, Travis Verkaik and Ed Scott wouldn't be struggling to make ends meet in a sport they've dedicated their lives to for so long. Individuals who fully dedicate themselves to their craft and contribute significantly to the community and culture, while upholding their principles of authenticity, are invaluable assets to parkour. Still, there isn't yet enough infrastructure in our industry that rewards sickness solely for the sake of sickness. In the future, if we continue to be possessed by the algorithm to the point that all our authentic principles are forgotten, I predict that parkour will spiral into lamedom, and participation will decline.

Survival of the Loudest

Couldn't one just argue that this is the dawning of a new age of parkour that should be welcomed with open arms? Couldn't one just say that I'm just a thirty-four-year-old millennial curmudgeon who has lost touch with what's cool and is yelling at clouds? Maybe. After all, as we've seen, the ones who hold the attention are the ones who write history. Every example of history in this book – those who have crafted the evolving shape of parkour – has garnered a large amount of attention. Whether by questionable means or not. Daniel Ilabaca and Phil Doyle dominated parkour on YouTube for a long time, shaping the scene into what many still view as parkour's golden era. This, however, was by no effort of their own; their amazing feats were luckily captured and uploaded by anyone in proximity with a camera.

The name *parkour* prevailed over *Art Du Déplacement* because David Belle was more obsessed with being in the spotlight, likely due to his daddy issues! While the Yamakasi sat back, perhaps resting on their laurels after their movie, they could have played a better hand in shaping history. (Although again, they were likely more interested in training and mentoring those who had been inspired into action after seeing their first film.)

Sébastien was widely regarded as the sole founder for a long time, thanks to the image Jump London and Jump Britain projected. But of course, David's phenomenal videos subsequently spread online like wildfire, and the attention they received quickly dispelled the myth, and David's myth prevailed.

You will rarely hear any mention of Yann Hnautra's father, who served in the military in New Caledonia, and of how his influence shaped the young founders' spirit of mental strength, physicality, collaboration, and altruism. And it's even rarer to hear about a group called *Maestra* from the very early days of parkour's gestation period in Lisses and Évry. This group comprised Laurent Piemontesi's younger brother, Sébastien Piemontesi and his friends, Rodrigue, Tinaro, Karim and Éric. Maestra clearly didn't do as well in the Attention Olympics and didn't make the history books. A more immediate example is that you are only reading this book because I am a notable figure in the parkour world. Not only would my words

hold less weight if I held less social capital, but you perhaps wouldn't be reading at all. Whether attention is earned or diligently worked for, history is written by those who are seen. Then the question becomes, what do we want to be seen in parkour's history books in the future?

What is Lost?

I ask you this: What is parkour if our highest priority core values are online attention and money? What happens to a practice that, despite still aligning with whatever definition we can conjure up, has no authentic soul whatsoever? Suppose the activity in itself becomes so empty that the reigning motivation is some of the lowest and most soulless of extrinsic motivations. In that case, I think we have lost the magic that parkour once encapsulated.

I believe it is devastatingly crucial to remember that our founders were developing and practising their art for ten years before anyone caught so much as a glimpse of them in the media. As I've mentioned, they were merrily content pushing themselves to their absolute limits in isolation, in their odd little masochistic bubble tucked away in the Parisian suburbs. Comparatively, today's parkourists couldn't be more flagrant in the ways they crave attention. Can you imagine how many would still be training if a worldwide EMP shut off the internet indefinitely? However, this doesn't only manifest online. Some of us shamelessly relish training at spots with dense pedestrian traffic. Maybe those of us who weren't popular enough at school, or who weren't hugged enough by mummy and daddy, finally found a way to receive the recognition they have so yearned for by doing shoddy backflips in public spaces and receiving lukewarm compliments and golf claps from passerby strangers.

The founders and their training stories make them sound like the most dedicated parkourists ever. They gave everything to parkour when parkour was nothing, and they only picked up a camera around a decade into their practice. No one thought to film when they hung each other over the edge of the top shelf of the Dame du Lac, trusting their mates to hold them upside-down by the ankles while they stared

helplessly down at the hard ground sixty feet below. Regardless of how few people had access to cameras back then, recording their actions for validation from the rest of the world was far from their minds. And this mentality trickled down to those they eventually mentored and trained with.

Mounia Moula is rumoured to be the first woman to jump the historic Manpower gap in Évry, nearly ten years before Lilou Ruel did so in 2022. When I spoke to friends about this, I was immediately met with knee-jerk questions such as, "Where's the clip then?" The idea that anyone should do something for themselves for the intrinsic value alone, without the act being tethered to recognition, a boost in followers or financial incentives, has become an alien concept in the current parkour media culture. There was no clip of Mounia doing Manpower because she cared so little about being etched into the history books. Even when asked, she becomes very cryptic about the subject, claiming, "What I do in parkour, I do for me."

There is no way of saying this without sounding like the self-righteous purists I have relentlessly slated throughout this book, but there was obviously something magical sewn into the early ideologies of the sport, which was evidently an incredible source of intrinsic motivation that touched many in the banlieues in the 90s. What was that magic? Has it been lost to time? And if so, can it be regained?

PART THREE

Chapter 18 - What Does Parkour?

"If what you're learning in parkour only applies to parkour, you're doing it wrong."
-Thomas Couetdic

"I think that life is really spread out. There are these key moments, and they are years and years out often. And parkour kind of distils these moments and condenses them into short training sessions. Testing your mind against your body. I think that's really valuable."
-Dylan Baker

Parkour (/pɑːˈkʊə/) noun
Parkour is a self-led movement practice where practitioners use only the abilities of their bodies to interact with obstacles of any given environment, with aims to create and/or overcome mental, technical and physical challenges, whether by short bursts of movement or long and complex sequences, including but not limited to, forms of jumping, swinging, climbing, vaulting and rotations on any axis. Whether the intention is for utility or the expression of an artistic style, improving and building upon personal limits are at the core of the practice.

We now have a new definition that we can all hopefully be happy with. It's a definition that will likely remain impervious to whatever future social media bullshit or malevolent alien federation can do to warp the way parkour is practised and depicted. However, as it continues to evolve, it may be far from what parkour *is* that we and future generations will lose; instead, we may lose what parkour *does*.

Just to recap. Our practice had its gestation in Lisses, Évry and Sarcelles, culminating in a slow and painful birth from 1997 to 2003.

This long and arduous era was so stressful that the parents broke up, but David Belle ultimately won custody of the child. Sébastien Foucan was lucky enough to see it on weekends for a while.

Once it had been born and thrust upon the world, it went through its long infancy with all the teething pains and irrational toddler tantrums that came with it. After the father swiftly went to the store to get milk and cigarettes and never returned, the young parkour was wandering the world alone, trying to make sense of it all. Daddy only occasionally comes back to collect child support.

Now you could say it's in its terrible teens, where it's young, dumb and full of... an unquenchable craving for Instagram followers. Just a hormone-fuelled, selfish, hedonistic mess that just needs to be liked by everyone. The pressure of what it's going to do when it's older weighs heavily upon it. It's unsure if it'll ever be able to make anything of itself. It's massively mentally and financially unstable, and it makes matters worse that its absent father only came back after over a decade to sell it off in an arranged marriage with the old and crooked gymnastics, who is only using it for money and to look cool.

However, I feel as though the winds of change are upon it as it approaches adulthood. But remember, just because it'll become an adult doesn't mean it'll have its shit together. There are a lot of fugly and brain-broken adults out there with a ton of psychological baggage to work through. It could be a homeless wreck, barking at bystanders at a bus shelter with a 2-litre bottle of White Lightning cider in hand. Alternatively, it could actually wind up pulling through marginally okay, grow stronger from its previous trauma, and maybe even make a widespread positive impact on the world.

We would do well to establish a clear direction and determine what impact we wish parkour to have. How does it fit into the world, and what value can it bring to it? What are our core values, and are they somewhat shared deep down among the different sub-communities of our culture? Can we identify the binding cultural bedrock of parkour?

What value does parkour bring to us? There are multiple layers to these questions, and in this chapter and the next, I'll attempt to chisel them out.

Effort is Relative

> *Parkour is a culture of effort. And that effort is mostly invisible to many.* -Julie Angel

We all know Dominic Di Tommaso. He's worked his way to becoming the most followed parkourist on Instagram. And unlike others who have slaved away to exploit the algorithm and meme-ify themselves to attain their following, Dom rose to prominence by slaving away as a passion-fuelled nutcase. Dom is an old-school Aussie lad from Sydney. Their community was already pretty mature early on, so he started training in 2007 surrounded by reasonably decent company. When it comes to outlining parkour's core values, some might assume Dom is the last person to serve as a shining example, given that his actions occasionally verge on self-harm. Still, one thing many have noticed about Dom is that, when out training, he gets amped up whenever anyone and everyone pushes themselves. It doesn't matter whether they are a beginner, intermediate, or seasoned elite; Dom would get equally excited and give credit where it's due. And he'll equally bully you and give you shit to the same degree, which, in my opinion, is remarkable.

Why would hotshot Dom, with over 3.7 million Instagram followers, a Red Bull sponsorship, who has countless times solidified himself as one of the greatest GOATs of all time, give a toss about little newbie Billie, who has just done their first kong? Why does Dom concern himself with the accomplishments of such cretinous underlings who are barely worthy of sharing the same air with him? Why does he treat little Billie no differently from his elite-level peers who do elite-level stuff?

Dom no doubt understands that it's the effort that's important, not merely the objective result. The effort and internal process bumbling along under the hood of little Billie, which led to the action and accomplishment, are the things worthy of praise for Dom.

Every challenge we encounter involves an internal process that must be muddled through to overcome it. This process involves gathering the missing information needed to feel confident moving forward. This includes data on the environment, one's current

physical and technical competence for the task, and one's current mental state. The information gaps are rarely filled purely by thinking and visualising the task, so we fill them by breaking the task into manageable chunks and physically feeling things out, as we call it, prepping. Prepping aids visualisation and a more accurate, realistic understanding of how to achieve the desired outcome. It updates our expectations and beliefs about our ability to perform the task. The process of committing to a jump involves calculating the risks, drawing on past experiences, and connecting the dots by creating preliminary micro-experiences through prepping.

With this process happening in the skulls of all of us, everything becomes relative to whoever is doing the challenge. Suddenly, it's less important whether it's a five-metre front flip or a fifteen-foot running precision to a rail, or even a kong over a waist-high wall for the first time. The only difference is that the former two demonstrate many other similar processes that have occurred previously. Although the internal process is less tuned, refined and efficient, the effort leading to a leap in progress in the less experienced Billie receives the same amount of encouragement, stoke and kudos from Dom because he rates the process, the drive, the intention and the effort above all, as well as the prospect for further growth in the future. Billie's process and subjective experience of struggle, determination, courage and joy is relatable to all parkourists. The appreciation for this process is widespread across our community. I've witnessed crowds of professional parkourists watch in awe as a beginner attempts their first challenge, even if the challenge could be done with relative ease by any one of them. In effort, we are all equal.

This isn't simply throwing away the idea of rewarding merit and instead doling out participation medals to everyone; it's more about valuing challenge, the experience, and what they demand of individuals. There is something powerful in these moments—the culmination of what can often be a long, gruelling, physically and mentally taxing battle. Fortunately, regardless of your level in parkour, the opportunities for these moments are limitless.

> "It doesn't really matter what the challenge is; what matters is that you face challenges regularly if you really want to test yourself and see what you are made of. This confrontation and will to overcome challenge is the heart of the beast that is Parkour, and it is beating more slowly with each passing year in the community."
>
> -Chris Rowat

I'm not convinced that the heart is beating slower nowadays, or whether it will ever beat its last entirely. Every parkour jam, local session, lesson, workshop or competition still feels like a tense but enjoyable and fulfilling battleground of effort. However, what may have changed, or may continue to change, is what we as a community choose to reward, which could shift our collective emphasis from subjective effort and experience to objective outcomes.

Effort is... Effort

In Julie Angel's book, *Breaking The Jump*, she tells the story of when a very young Williams Belle broke a jump in the Ecouen forest. Williams was far younger than the other founders. There was a ten-year age gap between him and Yann Hnautra. Williams was essentially a scrawny sprog tagging along with his two older brothers, Châu and Phung, his cousin David and a few of their friends from Lisses and Évry. It must have been strange joining in with these older boys and their outlandish games of gnarly jumps and extreme endurance workouts. They let the young Williams play along and even offered their support for this one scary jump. After a long period of deliberation and preparation, Williams conquered the gap after digging deep within himself to overcome the mental barrier. Completing the jump felt like the best thing ever, as if he had undergone a fundamental mental paradigm shift. He felt compelled to share the feeling with someone.

The very next day, he dragged his best friend Halis into the forest and encouraged him to overcome the same jump. Halis eventually made the jump too, but, to Williams' surprise, there was no

overwhelming sense of jubilation and revelation. To Halis, the jump was simply a jump, devoid of any value or meaning.

This story always reminds me of a conversation I had with a kid back in 2011. After around three years of petitioning, meetings with local councils, and refining various design iterations, one of the UK's first parkour parks was opened in the small Brighton suburb of Newhaven in 2010. We spent many afternoons at the park, and with each visit, more local kids tried to replicate the moves we did. There were a few promising regulars who would go every day after school. Each time we visited, we would see them making more and more progress. It was exciting to see this new generation spawning. We imagined that one day they would carry on until they were old enough to take trips to Brighton and train with the rest of the Brighton community.

Around a year on from the park being built, one day, one of the main talented kids – let's call him Bradley – came up to me and asked, "You're still doing that parkour thing then?"

To which I replied something like, "Well, yeah. I've been doing it for about four or five years now, and I don't see myself stopping anytime soon."

To which Bradley replied, "Isn't that, like... effort?"

I can't recall my reply to this baffling question, but I certainly remember being left feeling pretty bad for the kid, and, of course, I was let down that his talent and potential were going to go to waste.

Yes, it is *effort*.

I can only guess at what flicked the switch for him. I think it could be anything from the influence of some other bigger, unruly lads, broken adults, or something on TV. But something had shifted this kid's mindset from enjoying improving his skills, overcoming fear, and playing and swinging around at the parkour park to seeing it as a pointless, arduous chore. Despite our support for the Newhaven kids, parkour never took hold among any local youngsters. I couldn't help but feel sorry for little Bradley, who, despite his talent, grew to view parkour as something that was *effort* and, therefore, not worth his time. If every activity is a chore and you fail to glean any intrinsic value from pushing yourself and doing something difficult, I don't imagine you'll get too far in life. And if you do, it'll likely feel like a

tedious slog to the grave, only occasionally broken up by pints at the pub or a Deliveroo in front of the TV.

This attitude is perhaps more prevalent now in the Western world than at any other point in human history. We are undoubtedly living in an age of convenience. Not only are technology and automation making jobs and daily tasks easier for us, thereby robbing us of our autonomy and competence, but anything we do of our own volition, which requires effort, lacks intrinsic value. And when people do pick up a hobby, many are immediately incentivised to monetise it, turning it into a side hustle as soon as possible.

For young people, gaming acts as a replacement for genuine play. Gaming can act as a *flow trap*, providing hollow social connection and fulfilment through easy achievements that lack any substantial meaning and transferability to the real world. On top of this, video games can also narrow our field of vision, cutting us off from anything that might bring us flow and fulfilment beyond the world of our screen and gaming chair. On a Within Reason podcast, Cognitive scientist John Vervaeke explains, "You get flow within, and you get a disconnection without, and so what starts to happen is you start to return more and more to the game. Then you start, by contrast, to see the world less and less affording of flow, and then you get caught in this very vicious place where you get locked into the game. Your world reciprocally narrows, and your sense of agency reciprocally narrows down to that. So I think it definitely exacerbates people's experience of the possibility of a dark, absurd, inhospitable world."

Of course, gaming is entertaining, can improve reaction times, and has an undeniably vast industry for those who excel at it. (And their industry dwarfs parkour's by a ridiculous amount. You can now see stadiums packed with smelly subterranean nerds watching a few Esports *athletes* play video games against each other. The largest prize pool for an Esports tournament has been over $34 million! Of course, those making a living from gaming make up a minuscule minority of gamers.) However, for the average recreational gamer, to what extent do their countless hours of effort significantly change them for the better?

The Value of Doing (The Why)

> *"If I totted up all the things that parkour has given me, being physically able and just being able to peg it away from 99% of people is at the bottom of the pile."*
> -Toby Segar

A short video from Nick Ortiz garnered significant attention on Instagram and TikTok, showing him alone, high up on a wall, jumping into a window of what appears to be an abandoned building. The video undoubtedly received a lot of attention because, as Nick jumps back, a policeman appears from around a corner on the ground and yells, "Hey! What are you doing?" To which Nick calmly and flatly responds, "Parkour." The puzzled police officer then replies, "Why?" And then the video abruptly ends. The video had bags of viral potential: high jumps, police and a funny little bit with a fed at the end. It ticked all the social media scientist boxes on the ingredients list for a viral salad. However, the officer, although no doubt slightly naive, raises a good question.

Why is Nick Ortiz doing parkour? Why are you doing parkour? This question couldn't be more pertinent in a time when various extrinsic elements dominate our impulses. What drives you to train and push yourself as you do? Why don't you push yourself as much as you would like to? What do you get from your practice? What do you want from your practice? Why are you doing parkour instead of one of the many other sports or leisure activities? Why am I bombarding you with so many vague and invasive questions?

You must see the value in what you are doing to consider it worthwhile. Everyone, everywhere, who has achieved anything in their life, monumental or minuscule, has done so while feeling that there was a level of value behind the effort of their actions. Whether for expedient hedonic pleasure or conscientious foresight. That includes getting out of bed. That includes rolling a spliff. That includes working a job doing tedious, menial labour. It includes attempting to cure the world of cancer. We are spurred into action by the prospect of value, whether that is simply how it makes us feel

during the task or the reward upon completing it. Or how completing the task contributes value to other people or the rest of society. The intensity of this feeling of value can quite often correlate with the difficulty of the task, provided it is meaningful to you. A sacrifice of yourself in the present for the betterment of the future. In other words, doing hard shit can feel good if you see it as having value. As they say, nothing good ever comes easy.

Little Bradley from Newhaven clearly failed to see the value in swinging about in a parkour park, which is fair enough, as at first glance, it doesn't seem to offer much value beyond being able to show his mates something that looks pretty cool. Like Williams' childhood friend, Halis, Bradley likely preferred to go home and play his PlayStation; the path of least resistance.

Maybe it's true that there's nothing intrinsically special about the act of moving and jumping with obstacles. Humans have been moving for utility and survival for aeons without ascribing any ulterior metaphysical meaning to it. There is likely nothing inherently valuable in the movement itself beyond its applicability, which we rarely need to use in our daily lives. Needless to say, the value and meaning must be relevant to the individual. It ultimately comes down to how valuable it is to each person. Different people will take something different from it. A construction worker lifting bags of sand for 2 hours straight will find it an arduous, repetitive chore, whereas a CrossFit athlete will see it as a fun day out.

Parkour is undoubtedly unusual for members of the public witnessing it. Upon only seeing the sheer spectacle, people are too often led to think, "What the heck would lead a person to risk life and limb to jump between rooftops willingly?"

We see far too often comments on videos to the tune of, "This is such a pointless skill." And ironically, you can be assured that a large percentage of those commenting with this sentiment have squandered thousands of hours of their finite time on earth getting good at numerous video games. Comments like these beg the question, what do they deem a valuable skill to be? Skills that serve society in some way? Skills that can be converted into a product? Skills aiding in the maintenance of a status quo, keeping the system

stable and listlessly chugging along? Have these commenters seen golf? Predominantly obscenely dressed, middle-class white men ambling around acres of pristine fields that require countless gallons of water to maintain, whacking small orbs into holes with sticks... Seems pretty pointless, and wildly convoluted. But since it's been established for so long and there's a behemoth of an industry surrounding it, we barely question it. It's established to the extent that even one's proficiency at golf is apparently important enough to be used to score points in a US presidential debate.

These comments aren't too different from those saying, "I can't believe they're risking it all just for views and likes." Which, again, demonstrates how warped our views on motivation have become. Many are projecting, as they themselves can't imagine why anyone would do anything other than for social media clout. But as I covered in the previous chapter, the obedient puppets of the algorithm in the parkour community are doing a good job of perpetuating that mindset. Parkourists can be seen reflexively responding to these comments with the justification, "This is actually my job!" As if the fact that it's enjoyable or serves them in some other way isn't enough of a justification. And I don't doubt that many of us have tied ourselves in knots scrambling to justify parkour to our parents in similar ways.

Distance running as a leisure activity and exercise was also seen as unusual before it became popular. Running for utility is deeply woven into our ancestry as a species, as Christopher McDougall writes of at length in his book *Born To Run*. Our innate ability to gang up on our prey by chasing them for long bouts until the animals drop from exhaustion. And then there were couriers, for example, the Athenian Pheidippides, who ran from the site of the battle of Marathon to Athens to deliver the message of victory before promptly collapsing dead. However, it is a relatively modern concept to run for exercise and health. A person running in loose clothing on the cobblestoned streets of eighteenth-century London was likely to be interpreted as fleeing the scene of a crime rather than engaging in exercise for their health and leisure. Before it became culturally accepted and society became aware of the numerous health benefits, it must have looked odd and suspect, especially in an era where the

most popular exercise and pastimes were chewing tobacco and dying from dysentery.

Anything related to weightlifting also carried a certain stigma. Although weightlifting featured in the Olympics, as with running, it was strange outside of competition. In the nineteenth century, classic cartoonish old-timey strongmen, often dressed in leopard-print unitards, toured circuses and freak shows, performing feats of strength considered inhuman at the time. Nowadays, running and lifting weights are not only widely culturally accepted for their vast physical and mental benefits, but they have also spawned world-dominating industries. The streets are now littered with all kinds of people running around, tracking their pace, mileage, and heart rate with various apps and wearable gadgets. The same goes for commercial gyms lining the high streets. Everyone and their mother is now a personal trainer, draped in Gymshark clothing, and gyms everywhere are packed out with people from all walks of life. People will pay to go to large rooms with blaring dance music that no one likes, to run in place, clank metal circles, and sit in machines designed for single-joint movements, and between sets, they'll sit on their phones, consumed by brain rot. If it has become normal to go to a sweaty, humid room full of pulley contraptions, where most of the walls are lined with mirrors to watch yourself bicep curling in, then why is the practice of moving with obstacles in the street, park, or any other environment weird?

If running seemed like a bizarre idea to some a while back, you can bet this relatively new concept of jumping on walls, lamp posts, and benches will be puzzling for some now and will remain so for a while to come. In their perception, what could be the goal other than the spike of adrenaline from narrowly escaping the jaws of death or injury? If the aim is fitness, there are far less injurious ways of getting there. However, we know that there is undoubtedly more to it than that. We recognise that what we do serves us in a broader context, which makes it feel wholly worthwhile, although it can often be challenging to articulate and express.

People's general motivations tend to differ between sports and activities. For many people, long-distance running and gym machines

are simply tools to burn fat, build muscle and look good for their vacation photos in Bali. Some put an astounding amount of effort into crafting their physical appearance because they assume it's intrinsically linked to their self-worth and desirability, while ignoring the fact that they still harbour unbearable and reprehensible personality traits beneath the surface. (Just look at Clavicular.) For others, those things are seen as tools for maintenance to ward off health problems and earn the next few guilt-free binge weekends of junk food, booze, and class As. Or even punitive atonement for the previous nights of indulgent take-out meals.

There are many activities where these superficialities are merely byproducts of a competitive career. And then, some activities can be viewed as more experience-oriented, where the real benefits lie in what the moment, the social environment and the process offer you internally. I'm sure if many people could get these superficial benefits from a pill, they would stop running, lifting and stair-mastering without a second thought and never do them again. However, an avid runner or weightlifter who performs the same laborious exercise and feels just as much pain enjoys the activity and considers it an essential part of their mental health. Similarly, the construction worker would love for his wages to magically appear in their bank account instead of lugging sandbags for hours on end. In contrast, the CrossFit athlete will happily pay £60 a month for a gym membership to do essentially the same thing.

Needless to say, parkour is a great deal of fun for us. Fun is undoubtedly at the forefront of many of our motivations for training. Moving, creating, and challenging yourself with friends is immensely satisfying, engaging, and fulfilling. It puts you in the moment and can elicit a performance- and experience-altering state that the renowned Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls the *flow state*. (Otherwise known as being *in the zone*.) And this is no trivial thing. Flow can be described as the sensation of optimal experience initiated by total immersion in a task with the perfect level of difficulty for your current ability. It's essentially when your brain is firing on all cylinders. However, parkour is but one of many activities that create the conditions for flow. Aside from this, through prolonged practice, parkour can prove to be a fertile ground for self-cultivation.

The Slipperiness of Parkour Philosophy

You may have heard this sentiment before. It's often said that parkour is training for life. In the past, we have loosely used the term "parkour philosophy" to refer to anything related to parkour's value. Otherwise known as *the parkour spirit*. And I still feel a sharp pang of cringe when hearing the terms. I think they have always held nothing but elitist and condescending connotations. The terms often suggest a demarcation of the right and wrong way of doing parkour. In a sport that appears to be so free, the suggestion can rub people the wrong way.

Over the years, parkour philosophy has been consistently espoused by the sanctimonious purist crowd, often in a pseudo-profound manner, sprinkling in themes of altruism, chivalry, and integrity, leaving most parkourists with a sour taste in their mouths. A prime example is David Sedgley, in the *Northern Parkour* documentary, *The Nature of Challenge*. It can be hard to swallow his words wholesale, no matter how clearly articulated, when the video shows him and others sliding about in push-up position, among other superfluous and daft-looking quadrupedal conditioning drills. Also, he has supposedly once said something along the lines of, "If you haven't read David Belle's book in its original French, you don't understand parkour." It can be very easy to regard everything that comes out of his mouth after that statement as holier-than-thou drivel.

Another prime example is Dan Edwardes from Parkour Generations spouting statements such as, "Parkour is not simply a collection of movement techniques and training methods: it's a concept, an idea, a way of thinking and being. It's an art of living."

And, of course, videos like the one where he rambles on for several minutes about what it means to be a traceur. Then there's Vincent Thibault's entire book on the subject of parkour philosophy, which is none short of cliché quotes from long-deceased Zen masters and samurai. Parkour philosophy was all too often expressed solely by quadrupedie-enthusiast purists who prided themselves as the valiant white knights of parkour, ensuring the propagation and proper dissemination of the "true spirit" of the discipline.

And therein lies the problem. Who better to make a majority of the community reject an idea wholesale than a bunch of pretentious old-guard traceurs adopting a Bruce Lee-style vernacular, claiming that they are the only ones doing parkour properly, and suggesting everyone else is an egotistical heretic? As if to say, those pushing themselves without doing excessive amounts of push-ups and crawling on the floor for hours on end weren't absorbing the value that parkour has to offer, and their efforts for building upon themselves were null and void because it doesn't look a particular way.

In the early days of Storror, we were essentially acting in stark opposition to the pretentious, monk-like *way of the peaceful warrior* purists and their pseudo-philosophical ideology. There were many times when we were called out for giving parkour a bad name. For example, the altruistic tenets like *être fort pour être utile* (be strong to be useful) – we made videos where we threw litre cartons of milk from rooftops at groups of drunken lads walking on the street below. The self-preservation maxim, *être et durer* (to be and to last) – we made videos such as *'Taking the Height Drop' - Episode 46,* which was, as the name suggests, mainly comprised of gratuitous height drops. Most of which looked pretty ugly and painful. It also involved plenty of Jackass-style stuff in there, just to "give parkour a bad name" that extra bit more.

At the same time, we were also taking the piss out of the more progressive and commercial aspects of the sport. For example, making videos like *'Dear Red Bull' - Episode 104*, despite holding no qualms with Red Bull and their Art of Motion at all. As well as *'FR World Series Results' - Episode 48,* where we sabotaged and started a global boycott of Urban Freeflow's online video competition, which was their last whimper attempt at regaining backing from the community after being slandered en masse for so long.

We were essentially parkour punks, if you will... We were out to ruffle feathers by shitting on everything and constantly defiling the borders of what was deemed acceptable as noble traceur warriors. We would regularly troll our audience through our videos and posts. Not too many people noticed this, but on the backs of our clothing labels

from 2012 to 2016, the word *CUNT* was spelt out using fake washing instruction symbols. We received a couple of strongly worded emails from furious American mums.

But at the same time, we were pushing ourselves to our absolute limits with training and adventure. We pushed ourselves as individuals through our exploits in various adverse scenarios and as a group. Through my years of training, reflection, and observation, it's hard not to notice some of the values espoused by the purists seeping into my life and that of other members of the community.

In my view, parkour's philosophy, spirit, ethos, core values, or whatever you wish to call it, was never adequately communicated or advocated for in a way that was not only lame but also in a salient way. All too often, those who were over-protectively rallying against competition and commercialisation simply said it goes against parkour's philosophy and values. Then, there would rarely be any follow-up for what those things actually are. If anything, the beliefs held and advocated were made up of wishy-washy interpretations of a loose handful of poorly translated sound bites from the French founders, heard in a pixelated video from years ago. There was never a clear and tangible explanation of what they were to protect and what was at stake. And then, of course, valid reasons why things like competition and commercialisation threaten those things.

After a while, the voices grew quieter. Or, at the least, pushed into cosier corners of the community. Thus, the ideas weren't built upon, progressed, and then disseminated to the rest of the community. For most of the parkour world, the ideas surrounding the spirit, value and philosophy of parkour were halted in their tracks.

There may be some gold among the hazy, pseudo-philosophical drivel that's worth unpacking and salvaging, as well as some gold that can be pried from a deeper understanding of our experience.

So, I want to do this properly. I aim to present the value of parkour with greater clarity than anyone has before. A bold claim, I know. And of course, this is not the unamendable dogmatic parkour philosophy doctrine—this is still only parkour philosophy, according to Callum

Powell. Rather than presenting old dogmas and unpacking maxims like *être fort pour être utile*, it is more observational, pulling from what I've noticed in my twenty years of training.

Ultimately, in the next chapter, I aim to sell parkour to you, the practitioner, and help you appreciate the value of what you do more than you already do. Hopefully, it resonates with you, and you realise you already have an embodied understanding of what parkour *does*. However, you may never have probed deeply enough into your experience to formulate cogent and coherent thoughts.

It's not a matter of who is doing parkour "wrong" or "right". It's not a matter of impeding anyone's actions with a strict set of commandments. Some of these ideas can also be used as heuristics – rules of thumb – to help shape your *why* and maintain a healthy relationship with the sport to get the most out of your training, shaping your character and life in ways that are best for you.

Chapter 19 - Parkour Philosophy

> *"It is not what the man does to the mountain. It is what the mountain does to the man."* -Old mountaineering motto

> *"On the one hand, character refers to what is essential and unchanging about the individual. On the other hand, it refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed during fateful moments."* -Erving Goffman

How does challenge and effort change us? If our experiences shape us, then surely more profound experiences shape us in a more profound and meaningful way. When a significant amount of our training involves finding challenging, scary problems and figuring out how to overcome them despite the fear, and we act this out continuously for years, it's difficult to imagine how it wouldn't shape us in various ways.

With this in mind, perhaps parkour philosophy can be characterised by the fact that it's not the jumps that are inherently important, but rather how they slowly form us over time.

Antifragile

Nassim Taleb makes the case that things that thrive in unstable, random and volatile conditions are "antifragile". You may ask, "Why antifragile?" When asked what the opposite of fragile is, most might answer *robust*, *strong* or *sturdy*. What is the need for this new word? Nassim Taleb points out that robust, sturdy things do not adapt and become stronger or more resilient when confronted with a stressful stimulus. They remain unchanged, whereas something that is antifragile adapts to stressors. This is the real inverse of fragile.

Taleb assigns systems into three categories:

Fragile - that which breaks from experiencing stress.
Robust - that which experiences no change from stress.
Antifragile - that which gains from experiencing stress.

These concepts apply across multiple domains. Taleb argues that systems that are more accustomed to stressors, volatility and randomness do better when confronted with them. The human body can be a perfect example of this. Our immune system can only be effectively strengthened by exposure to threats; it must encounter germs, bacteria and viruses to develop the ability to fight them off. The more micro-dosing an immune system receives in this way, especially when young, the stronger and healthier it will become. As we know, our muscles, connective tissues, and bones break down slightly after bouts of strenuous activity. They then rebuild stronger, assuming these tissues have the capacity to withstand the stressful stimuli in the first place. If it can't, it's fragile to the specific stressor, and you get pain or injury. If it can, it's antifragile: it recovers, supercompensates, becoming stronger and better adapted to the demands of the strenuous activity, and will then require slightly more stress to elicit further growth.

Many assume Dominic Di Tommaso to be a maniac who launches himself at unholy challenges without fully knowing what's going to happen. Frankly, they are correct to a large extent. But his mentality of "let's give it a red-hot go and see what happens" is only buttressed by his near superhuman ability to deal with the consequences when shit hits the fan, which it does with regular frequency. Someone who can take the heftiest of height drops and the most gruesome spills, and not only come out the other end unscathed, but gain from the experience with fresh information about the limits of his ability, is without a doubt antifragile. His superpower has always been that he can feel confident pushing into chaos and uncertainty, and that he can expand his limits far more easily and frequently than someone more fragile.

When training at your edge, you gain a massive wealth of valuable feedback and absorb an abundance of information about yourself and your abilities. Training at your physical edge, although

valuable, is risky when your body can't handle the consequences of when things don't go exactly as planned. For example, you aren't likely to feel as confident gunning at a running precision close to your maximum when you have a bad ankle. To not injure yourself further with an *ankle thing* or a heavy crane, you have to get the judgment just right. On a day when your ankles and everything else feel great, and you feel fit to take a heavy bounce off or two, you're better equipped to deal with chaos and uncertainty.

Dom can train at his edge and beyond, collecting significantly more data than the average parkourist with every training session. When watching his videos, people see a thrill-seeking nutcase throwing caution to the wind, sending it, and often bailing. Yes, that is somewhat the case, but the nutcase has a body that ensures the mind that it is safe to send, and reap the rewards of the newly gathered data. Whether it's a success or a horrific bail that would mutilate any other parkourist, it's a win/win game. It's apparently a win/win for his Instagram account, too. Dom is antifragile as he can gain from disorder. (However, in recent years, the cracks began to show as Dom stacked injury upon injury. Then, although his body was more fragile, his mentality of antifragility remained, which only resulted in accruing more injuries.)

It makes sense to aim to become antifragile in all aspects of life, so we are less likely to be overwhelmed and broken down by daily events. Life is none short of random and stressful moments, many of which we don't choose. We should aim to be antifragile in the broadest sense to come out on top whenever we are confronted with them. Our minds work on the same principles as the body in how we can respond to external stress. When we're faced with new information that conflicts with our prior understanding, we must reconcile the new with the old, construct mental models, predict future events, and evaluate the past. This disruption in homeostasis is called learning, and it can often be quite stressful and chaotic for our minds. This is usually because part of us must be figuratively chipped away to make way for a new, updated understanding of ourselves and the world, just as our muscles and bones break down and recover stronger than before.

Atrophy and fragility are prevalent across all aspects of life, and exposing yourself to stressful stimuli is the easiest way to avoid them. When we insulate ourselves from risk, uncertainty, and randomness, we become more vulnerable to them in the long run. In the book *Antifragile*, Nassim Taleb uses this analogy: "Small forest fires periodically cleanse the system of the most flammable materials, so they do not have the opportunity to accumulate. Systematically preventing forest fires from taking place to be safe makes the big ones much worse."

Minor problems can be beneficial because they can prevent more severe problems.

An antifragile mindset is something I've witnessed in spades throughout parkour culture. It's a practice where we voluntarily expose ourselves to risk and challenge with open curiosity, and in doing so, we cope with them more effectively. We thrive on challenges and seek novel experiences, becoming highly adaptable and confident individuals with a healthier relationship with uncertainty.

Challenge-Positivity

> *"Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one. It's not stress that kills us, it's our reaction to it."*
> -Hans Selye

In Vincent Thibault's book entitled *Parkour and the Art du Déplacement*, he writes:

> "We are talking about a culture of effort; in any case, we must understand that its benefits go far beyond the athletic context. Effort is the mobilisation by a conscious being of all available resources to move past an obstacle, to solve a problem, to achieve a goal or to overcome psychological or environmental resistance. It follows that a person who regularly mobilises effort and enjoys doing so, at least to some extent; a person who is not too invested in results, as long as he or she gives it everything they've got; someone who knows that one of the highest truths of life is that the process is the objective; in short, anyone who embraces the concept of effort will be able to cope with life's difficulties."

There has long been the idea that the practice of parkour, with its inherent focus on problem-solving and overcoming physical, technical, and mental challenges, can be applied broadly to better navigate life's challenges. Some will claim it's not only through developing a methodical internal process for overcoming challenges and adversity, but also by altering our perception of them. Recognising that something can be gained from any difficult task can change your perception of it, whether the task is mundane or grand. With this mindset, something negative for someone can often be positive for us. And since life is full of challenges, this shift in perception can only lead to a happier life. Not only will you be more at peace with adversity, but you will be able to see value in it and harness it for growth.

It's a nice sentiment for sure, but perhaps a somewhat unsubstantiated one for parkourists. When you look at the international parkour community as a whole, it's easy to have your doubts. You may know people who have been training for well over a decade and are incredible at parkour, but their life, in a general sense, is still a total upside-down mess in a conventional sense.

"Callum Tips no.158 - Parkour not only helps you overcome obstacles physically, but also obstacles in life too. I guess that's why most parkour athletes are broke."

Despite my past mockery, I am a fairly firm believer that parkour certainly holds something special in this regard. However, it may be missed or at least not harnessed optimally for many. And perhaps success in a conventional sense is not the yardstick. Many would argue that different sports can offer similar qualities. It is undoubtedly possible to glean the same problem-solving methods and a challenge-positive perception shift from rock climbing, surfing, boxing, white-water rafting, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, or any other activity where problem-solving and overcoming challenges are part and

parcel. So why does the idea persist that parkour is so unique in this sense?

In a Swapping Shoes podcast, Kie Willis had Luis Alkmim up against the ropes, essentially battering the parkour magic out of Luis's heart. Luis often asks his podcast guests, "What is the most meaningful lesson that parkour has taught you that you can apply to your life?"

Kie replies, "I don't think there was one specifically. Parkour people think that parkour is so special and unique. The only thing that makes it special and unique is how young it is. There's responsibility with it in regards to that, but apart from that, it's just a fucking sport where you jump off walls."

In response, Luis reflexively laughs, likely to hold back the tears. And Kie adds cheekily, "It's true, man. Fucking get over yourselves!"

If you listen very closely at this point in the podcast, you can just about hear Luis's heart break in two.

I have personally been in and out of a similar cynical mindset about parkour being special ever since joking with my old, sceptical friend Rupert Hugh-White about parkour's self-righteousness. We would poke fun at the pious purist camp that endorsed these ideas, scoffing at them as a pretentious, flimsy, and asinine pseudo-philosophy that was regularly poorly and cornily communicated, almost coming off as satire in and of itself, inspired by old martial arts movies.

But at the same time, for me, it's been impossible to feel that parkour hasn't changed my worldview, no matter how I've wanted to be cool, cold and cynical.

It was only after starting parkour that I began to respect the idea of putting sincere effort into things. It became a virtue to believe that only good can come from challenges, new experiences, and new knowledge of myself and the world, all geared towards bettering myself. I was an insufferable little shit in school who persistently disrupted the class, never listened, or did any work. I did abysmally in all my final exams. It was only after starting parkour that I realised my teachers could genuinely give me something useful, rather than just making me do pointless shit I felt was forced on me. It's hard for

me to trace my new mindset at the time to a specific source within parkour, or whether it's just a trickle-down of ideas that had been slowly disseminated socially that had become tightly enmeshed within parkour culture at such an early stage. Still, something had no doubt switched within my teenage mind during my first years of parkour. Something which my prior several years immersed in rollerblading had failed to provide.

Challenge-positivity remains prevalent in the community, though it often manifests in subtle ways. One example is how most parkourists tend to spread their gaze to other weird, challenging things. Within our community, numerous odd extracurricular and intra-session hobby trends have come and gone, such as Kendama, juggling, Rubik's Cube, bottle flipping, hacky sack, and skateboarding. There's a peculiar underlying addiction to challenge, play and new things. It's rare for any group of parkourists to simply sit and chat in a usual social setting without some sort of game, such as pool, darts, or card games. Or when there is nothing obvious to hand, we will often find a way to gamify our immediate surroundings. There have been countless times at parkour events where we'll be sitting at dinner tables, either at the event's venue or in restaurants among regular paying customers, where parkourists will start stacking up whatever is at hand to create a large balancing tower. Picture a table of full-grown adults, seemingly with ADHD, intently stacking a large and precarious vertical sculpture made from bottles, glasses, cutlery, menus, coasters, and salt and pepper shakers. (In 2025, we introduced the stack game to Michael Bay at a fancy roof terrace bar in Austin, Texas. He got involved, adding a few glasses, only for me to get too bold and topple the whole six-foot stack, resulting in broken glass all over the floor. Somehow Toby ended up on his back.)

At bars, where everyone else will be merrily chatting and enjoying their beverages like respectable members of society, a group of parkourists will often be seen huddled around, taking turns trying to pull a coaster out from between a stack of glasses or bottles on the table, like Jenga, except the stakes are that you smash the bottles and get kicked out of the bar. (Which perhaps didn't happen in Austin because we were in Bay's company.) Another slightly less antisocial

go-to is the game where you flip cardboard coasters up from the table with your fingertips, then try to catch them mid-air before they land back on the table.

Everything gets subverted into a little challenge or a game. Although this obnoxious and childish behaviour may be relatively commonplace among some groups of non-practitioners, it is undoubtedly a widespread epidemic across parkour.

What is funny about Kie is that, despite him being the most unbearably cynical and almost irrationally over-rational person you will meet, over the years I've known him, he has ventured deeply into the widest variety of skills and hobbies you can imagine. Just to mention a few: spearfishing, skateboarding, long-distance running, cycling, bouldering, mountain biking, cinematography, photography, juggling, piano, guitar, F1 driving simulator, FPV drone piloting, free diving, and tennis. He got so deep into the Rubik's Cube trend that he had an entire shelf devoted to various-shaped ones in his flat (which must have been a real turn on whenever he'd have girls over). Maybe it's just Kie, or maybe it's parkour's influence. Perhaps it's his personality, combined with parkour and a generous dash of autism. Despite his cynicism, Kie seems like the perfect example to support the claim that parkour helps cultivate a life that is not only well-prepared to overcome challenges but also actively seeks them out. Challenge-positivity expands the breadth of experience you're willing to welcome into your life.

Daniel Ilabaca once said:

> "Where someone would see a wall that closes them in, the mentality of parkour enables you to see something that is a joy to overcome. And that isn't just within parkour as a practice; it can also be translated to business and how you overcome obstacles at work. So many people can go through life and struggle through obstacles that are in front of them, but what I find within the practice of this movement is that it helps you to readjust your mindset and find joy within the difficulty."

Once we view parkour as a tool for growth through challenge, it can empower us to view every obstacle not as a stifling blockade to progress but as a stepping stone toward growth.

I believe that parkour and the culture's prevailing mindset make it easier to discover these challenge-positive values. A significant part of parkour is simply exposing yourself to the challenges of your choosing, so that they can change you for the better. We choose to subject ourselves to a state of "suffering" and push our limits to what we can handle so we can overcome it and reap the rewards. The obstacles we face in parkour aren't genuine obstacles because we can very easily go around them—we can simply choose not to do challenges if they turn out to seem too daunting or the juice isn't worth the squeeze. They are obstacles we put in front of ourselves by choice, which inadvertently make us better at overcoming the physical and mental obstacles in life that we don't choose and can't simply circumnavigate.

Many people's lives are bulldozed by adversity, and life ploughs them into a progressively deepening hole of suffering. We don't get to choose the bad things that happen in our lives. Problems in life are wholly inescapable. To exist is to suffer. The pessimistic German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer would tip his hat to that statement. Therefore, voluntarily exposing oneself to all manner of problems to hone one's ability to deal with them makes sense for becoming a more effective and adaptable problem solver. Thus, an adaptable and antifragile human who's better equipped for whatever may come their way.

I believe it's essential to recognise that our values determine our emotional states. Little Bradley from Newhaven, who views any bump in the road as an inconvenience, will likely not deal well with life's unavoidable problems. Bradley may become overwhelmed, flustered, anxious, angry, saddened, or depressed by the rise of even the most trivial banality, resulting in perpetual discontent. Events will control him, rather than him having control over events. And more importantly, his ability to maintain control over his emotional state during events he cannot control.

A perspective of challenge-positivity is incredibly empowering, as it provides freedom through strength and independence—the

freedom to find comfort in discomfort, thus fully harnessing the ubiquity of challenge for our benefit. With the right mindset and value system, any challenging activity, or challenge in general, can be a valuable tool for reaching your full potential. I think parkour may just be the activity with the most potential to reveal the potential value of everything towards your potential... potentially.

EXP Accumulation (Neophilia)

> Neophilia / ˌniːəʊˈfɪlɪə / noun
> *A deep appreciation and enthusiasm for anything new or different.*

In my 200th Callum Tip, I used the EXP system (experience points) from old video games to analogise effective ways to progress for parkour. You can think of EXP as total experience. With this idea, whether difficult or easy, everything you do adds to your total EXP.

> "Everything you do, whether it's practising or drilling moves, completing a challenge, or going through the steps leading up to it, like feeling the jump out with a prep bounce off, all these things are adding to your total EXP. Each thing you do rewards you with points, and you get more points according to how hard it is for you. In these video games, if you are a level 75 Charizard, for example, and you are spending day in, day out smashing level 5 Weedles, it's gonna take an awfully long time to reach level 76. You gotta give your Charizard something that's gonna put it through its paces. Ultimately, the point I'm trying to make is, you want to rack up as much EXP every training session so you're using your time well and getting the most you can from every session."

To maximise the rewards of parkour, it makes sense to experience as much challenge as possible to take as much as you can from your practice. When you specialise in one area of parkour too much, your

EXP may plateau. But when you orient yourself down a different, less trodden path, you are suddenly faced with entirely new challenges, which, if embraced fully, can prove a hotbed for EXP. You have just opened a door to a potential wealth of *newbie gains* in untrodden territory. Different mental demons rise from the abyss that were previously hidden, or old ones you thought you had conquered, such as impatience, frustration, or the fear of looking silly. This may be one reason why we have so much respect for all-rounders in parkour—those who possess a high level across such a broad skill set. We appreciate that they have repeatedly gone through the process of being a novice in so many movements to become a jack-of-all-trades, rather than simply sticking to what has become comfortable.

It is especially common for parkourists to be radically open to new experiences. Our EXP-oriented way of thinking also seems to extend beyond the practice of parkour. We can see a culture of people who are motivated to orient themselves towards what is novel and off the beaten path, rather than a culture of people quick to make feeble excuses to stay in their cosy bubble of habitual routine. This is reflected in how many of us tend to travel on parkour trips—travelling by any means necessary, with minimal funds and limited luggage, usually resulting in sleeping on rooftops, beaches, construction sites, or the living room floors of other parkourists we've only just met. Many will do anything to make it work, which usually ends up being difficult and uncomfortable, but still an exciting and novel experience, generally worthy of a good story. This is also reflected in our incessant need to pacify our ADHD-like tendencies through extracurricular activities such as Kendama, juggling, bottle flipping, hacky sack, Rubik's Cube, or stacking items on restaurant tables.

I think it's fair to say that many parkourists have a level of routine-phobia. What can be gained from reliving the same experiences over and over? What value can be plucked from something so stale and orderly? How will you ever reach the *next level* only by flogging Weedle after Weedle?! It's an impractical life model for accumulating the optimum amount of life EXP. It can be a recipe for stagnation and fragility. The right dose of chaos and uncertainty keeps things fresh, creates better memories and stories, and produces

stronger, more adaptable, and more versatile individuals. We shouldn't shy away from uncertainty, new experiences, and the various challenges they bring due to the value the challenges of those experiences may bring to us. Experience brings value, and remaining curious enough to immerse yourself in novel experiences consistently allows you to sample the full breadth of what a person can feel and experience, creating a stronger, more confident person with a richer, more fulfilling life.

However, our routine aversion can easily become our achilles heel when society is structured in a way that expects us to re-live the same day at work until we retire. Although we may be squeezing as much as we can from life, if our tolerance for order and monotony is so low, we may be stunted when the pressures of life eventually squeeze us into a position where we reluctantly have to fit into normality. How can we expect to cope with the monotony of what the stereotypical working life demands of us if we can barely sit through dinner at a restaurant without stacking glasses, beer bottles, cutlery and menus into a tall and precarious tower?! How can we expect to feel content and satisfied in a nine-to-five once we've had a taste of what's out there, knowing that there is still so much more to experience? Regardless of how our challenge-positive mindset helps us thrive and climb the ranks at work, if we lack the patience to stick with a position, we might get caught in a repetitive cycle of flip-flopping between low-paying, unsatisfying work for years.

Laurent Piemontesi of the Yamakasi commits to 1,001 squats every Sunday. That is an awful lot of squats, regardless of whether you're a man in your fifties or not. Every single Sunday, without fail, whether alone or with company, rain or shine, he will blast them out. Then he will post a photo of himself and whoever accompanied him in completing the challenge, with a croissant and a smile. I had wondered why he would do the same challenge every week. What more can be gained from putting yourself through the same tiresome and monotonous squats Sunday after Sunday? Surely you would expect to hit a plateau in physical and mental rewards? Wouldn't the EXP gained begin to dwindle? And then it struck me that sticking to the routine, regardless of the weather, the lack of company, or how

he's feeling on that Sunday, is itself the challenge. Sticking to the routine requires mental strength and discipline. And with each Sunday, he is no doubt greeted with subtly different demons that could cause him to question whether it's worth continuing.

Discipline is on the other side of novelty-seeking. And there is still EXP to be gained in showing resolve and staying the course. This, however, may be far from the ultimate remedy for the existential angst associated with being locked into a soul-crushing nine-to-five. Still, discipline might help you stick to a course that you believe will lead somewhere more meaningful.

Know Thyself, Grow Thyself

"*An unexamined life is not worth living*" -Socrates

As mentioned before, the founders aimed to be strong in every conceivable sense of the word. They aspired to be the heroic figures they admired on TV. They weren't overly picky about what they did; they cared more about what that thing did *to* them. Their radical training and lifestyle were not simply gratuitous self-harm. They cared more about what the task demanded of them than about the task itself. They cared about what it brought up to the surface in themselves. Everything was an exploration into the self, thus creating transformative experiences.

Before voluntarily putting yourself in a life-or-death situation, a lot within yourself that may have remained hidden is brought to your attention and must be assessed scrupulously before making a decision. Even if the decision is to step away from the challenge, a great deal can be learnt about yourself and your inner workings. The same goes for the founders' extreme endurance challenges. They would push themselves to the brink and beyond so that when the voice inside them begged for a rest, they could confront it and win. They collectively pushed themselves in some of the most brutal and arbitrary ways: training all day without food or water, and sleeping without blankets on cold nights. As mentioned earlier, they even dangled each other headfirst over the edge of the top of the Dame du

Lac. It was about doing difficult things and then rising from the ashes as a mentally and physically stronger version of themselves. They would back themselves into a corner to see what demons would come out, greet them, and then overcome them.

David Belle, Stephane Vigroux and Johann Vigroux once set themselves the challenge of doing one thousand height drops in one sitting from above two metres. This is a ludicrous idea and cannot be considered anything beyond a gruesome mental challenge to test their will against their mind and body. (Stephane even did this challenge on two separate occasions!) But they knew they were mining for gold, and their unquenchable curiosity knew where to find it. The gold was in conquering the persisting demon in their minds that time and time again cried out in anguish, "Excusez-moi, mon frère!!! What the fuck are you doing?! Stop this bull shit, and let's go get a fucking croissant!!"

These moments offer transformative insight into the self, along with the subsequent happiness and fulfilment upon the task's completion. And beyond the moment, too. When confronted with a difficult challenge in the future, you can pull from prior experiences of mental strength to help convince yourself that you can persevere through the present obstacle. These voluntary moments of hardship can instil a strong sense of self-confidence.

In essence, their training aimed to transcend their own emotional and physical limitations, enabling them to explore their identity and develop a more autonomous and authentic sense of self. Each training session, they were ultimately excavating and updating their map of themselves in bite-sized chunks.

In a Podcast Away episode, counselling psychologist and PhD Kasturi Torchia speaks of her experience starting parkour:

> "The first was just finding the common love in the movement. The second was this idea of how exposing it was for me, and how different I was within that setting. And then, as a result of that, I took away thinking, you can see a person's formulation in how they respond to the movement. So in that sense, you can see their emotional, psychological thought coping make-up."

Kasturi later founded Esprit Concrete, which paired parkour coaching with counselling psychology. She saw parkour as such a fertile ground for self-reflection that she fused her skills as a therapist to guide people on a path of self-discovery, facilitating the learning of movement while healing one's sense of self.

Every training session presents opportunities to understand how we operate internally and work towards becoming who we aspire to be. Impatience, frustration, arrogance, corrosive competitiveness, self-esteem-crushing comparisons with others, or the fear of looking silly in front of others are all feelings that can arise during a session. If we pay close attention to the thoughts and emotions that arise during our process, we are better positioned to align with the character traits we admire and to work to quiet those we don't.

Appreciating this can help you turn your gaze toward any novel and challenging new skill or opportunity for experience, even outside of parkour, and come away with something of value. The long-fought war waged against flips falls apart with this in mind. As if nothing can be gained from the process of learning a new and scary flip, or tying in an old flip into a new context? This is so untrue that it's ridiculous. Many have cast them aside as "not parkour" because they weren't usable in a reach/escape scenario. Beyond this, flips were stigmatised as merely a tool for the showman as a way to impress. To this day, you can still occasionally see idiotic comments claiming that "flips are just showing off", which boldly assumes the intention of the person flipping, as if someone's intentions for doing a roof gap, running precision, descent or a speed vault can't inherently be showing off as well, simply because they're not going upside-down. This suggests that the sincere effort of someone working toward their first gainer outside amounts to nothing for the individual other than the validation of others. With a flip, there is just as much value in battling through the fear and the process of overcoming it as in any other parkour movement.

When it comes to intrinsic value and transformative insight, there is no clear hierarchy of movements within parkour. You do not need to emulate the long and arduous quadrupedal marathons of the

founders, as the purists so love to. So long as what you are doing is challenging for you, it is good. A significant part of dealing with these challenges lies in how we approach them and cope with adversity.

Expectation vs Reality

Still, the policeman's question to Nick Ortiz remains—Why? Why would someone be driven to risk their life and put it all on the line for a jump that lasts one second? Why put ourselves in such life-threatening conditions for any of this?

It's a challenging task to convince some concerned members of the public who are quick to label us as adrenaline junkies who are destined to break our necks if we persist. How would you convince them that you're not just chasing the momentary gratification from the acute spike in stress response chemicals coursing through your bloodstream from narrowly escaping the jaws of death?

Overcoming fear is such a powerful thing for all of us. In Max Barker's short book, *Wild Thing In A Wild World - The Chronicles of a Parkour Athlete*, Joseph Henderson begins his foreword by saying:

> "Parkour is, at its core, a mental pursuit. Of course, what we do is physical in its result. The movement of our bodies across our environment. Jumping on walls, yada yada. But the place at which this odd pastime becomes meaningful is defined by progressions of the mind. Fears overcome; mental battles fought and won. That is not to deny that there is some interplay between the mental and the physical. Developing a base of strength and technique may rightly improve confidence, and overcoming mental barriers can open up new opportunities for physical and technical progression. But ask any freerunner what it is that they enjoy about parkour, and their answer is likely going to include something about the glorious feeling of fulfilment achieved upon the completion of a new and difficult challenge. It is that sense of taking a potential action out of

> the realm of uncertainty and into the realm of achievability that is the primary source of enjoyment in parkour."

I've said it before, and I'll say it again—managing and overcoming fear is a foundational cornerstone of our practice, and it's hard to get anywhere in parkour without coming up against some mental battles, and they are consistently intensely rewarding to overcome. I can't guess the intentions of all of you reading this to overcome fear in parkour. Perhaps it is simply a dopaminergic pursuit for many of you. Or maybe it is just a sacrifice you make for the future reward of having people figuratively sucking your dick on social media. Or perhaps something significantly more lasting and meaningful is occurring in your training sessions. Something that keeps you coming back and drives you to hunt for more scary challenges to overcome.

In another *Evolve Move Play* podcast with Stephane Vigroux, Rafe Kelley says that the only reason he can come up with is that, "It changes something in me that's worthwhile to become the person that I become through doing the jump. Fundamentally, the thing that we're after is the thing that we become or the people we become through this process."

What do we become, and what is gained after these close and personal brushes with risk and danger?

For starters, these moments can offer a bit of perspective. There is a scene in the documentary *Free Solo*, where Alex Honnold undergoes a battery of tests in an fMRI machine, and the results conclude that his amygdala does not fire. (The amygdala is a small, almond-shaped part of the brain that primarily regulates emotional responses, including fear, anxiety and aggression.) This leads the viewer to believe that Alex is simply wired differently, which allows him to perform so many death-defying climbs with nothing but his chalk bag and climbing shoes. However, when asked about this scene in a Rich Roll podcast, Alex explains, "It's not that my amygdala doesn't fire, it's that my amygdala wasn't firing for that level of stimulus. I was looking at pictures in a totally safe space, and to me, obviously, I shouldn't be scared. But typically, that would light somebody's fear response, but that's because they don't spend their whole life getting

scared for their life. I've spent my whole life being completely gripped, scared out of my mind all the time. Obviously, what I'm doing in this fMRI machine isn't gonna be scary."

He continues, "I would argue that I have a healthier relationship with fear as a result. If you're in this fMRI machine, and with the battery of tests they were using with their standardised test of a selection of images that pop up in front of you, and you're lying there totally safe inside this machine, surrounded by scientists, it's all chill, why would that be scary? But for the average human, by seeing certain images, their brain lights up in certain ways. But I would argue that's kind of silly, because you shouldn't trigger a fear response unless you're actually in danger. With many years of climbing in dangerous places, I've sort of conditioned myself to light up to fear when I'm actually in danger. Climbing is fundamentally scary, and I think that does desensitise you to all these other fears in life. Like, being late for your flight just isn't scary anymore compared to thinking about death."

This isn't to say that facing real fears in parkour inevitably makes us an emotionless robot like Honnold… When we manage fear often enough, we can learn to understand it better. We can learn to differentiate between real, physical danger and general anxiety, which, in turn, better positions us to respond proportionately. When managing real risk and consequence scenarios, other, more mundane and everyday situations can seem less significant, and we can relax a little bit more when we're late for a flight, taking an exam, doing stand up comedy at an open mic, leaning in for a first kiss, meeting our partner's parents, or standing up to your shitty boss. We can also move forward with greater confidence and take a leap without the hindrance of unjustified, disproportionate fear.

However, despite this notable shift in perspective, our decisions to act are rarely leaps of faith; in parkour, they are more often a delicate risk-benefit assessment. A conscious or unconscious risk-benefit assessment accompanies every decision we make in life. Just because you won't die, it's still wise to take a risk-benefit assessment before you decide to piss in your boss's coffee. It's worth reiterating that when we insulate ourselves from risk, we actually become more vulnerable to risk in the long run. Prioritising safety and

comfort by abstaining from engaging with risk is, in itself, risky. The biggest risk is not taking any.

In Nassim Taleb's writings, he uses the phrase *"skin in the game,"* which was originally a stock market term popularised by Warren Buffett. When you have skin in the game with something, you are involved to the point that its outcomes directly affect you. A typical example of skin in the game in business and trading is high-ranking insiders using their personal funds to buy stocks of the company they are a part of. Taleb uses the example of bridge builders in Ancient Rome and their families, who had to sleep under their newly built bridges for a period of time. If it were to collapse due to shoddy handiwork, the builder would lose their life and the lives of their loved ones. Another simple example is a chef who eats at their own restaurant.

An example of low skin in the game is when politicians set public education policies while sending their own children to private schools. Or when politicians impose austerity measures while they continue to receive high salaries and perks. Or when politicians push for war without them or their own family members enlisting in the military. Or politicians implementing abortion laws despite lacking a womb. Or politicians doing practically anything. Another example of low skin in the game could be engaging in debates about politics or philosophy. Especially when there are few clear ways to determine who is right or wrong, leaving neither party an opportunity to receive the necessary positive or negative feedback on their assertions. Another level below this is arguing in comment sections via an anonymous burner account. People would be far less likely to engage in such hateful online exchanges if everyone's comments were footed by their full name and address. One last example is social media influencers promoting products they don't use themselves. They are paid regardless of whether the product works or harms consumers. (For the record, I have used Huel quite a lot in the past. It may not be harmful, but it is still a sacrilegious, vile, sandy, beige slurry that should only replace real food if you harbour a deep hatred for yourself. However, Huel Black Edition does contain 400 calories, 40 grams of protein and 26 essential vitamins and minerals…)

We feel that our intuitions are correct on certain things, but the more removed we are from the results of our actions, the less likely our intuitions are to be meaningful. When breaking a jump in parkour, you have skin in the game as you are directly affected by your decision to act. We rarely make reckless decisions when we know the consequences are high and result in pain, injury and time away from what we love. We have a stake in the outcome, so we give our best. You cannot bullshit yourself with parkour. Every challenge is a mirror of your ability and judgment. You can either do the jump, or you can't. These are high feedback scenarios. You put your money where your mouth is, and if your estimations are wrong, you get instantaneous and unambiguous feedback; you succeed, or you fuck up, and quite often, get fucked up. Another consequence can be a substantial knock to your confidence, which can take a long time to rebuild. In neuropsychology, this is called a negative prediction error. Your brain predicted safety, but the sensory data proved otherwise. This error updates your internal model for the future. However, when you succeed and encounter no unwanted surprises, you are rewarded with more confidence.

Our brains are prediction machines. They constantly predict various outcomes and compare them to incoming data. When breaking a jump or anything that scares us, we're essentially practising matching our expectations of reality with actions; we visualise what a jump is going to be like if we were to commit, based chiefly on gathered information from experience, then when we commit and it goes as expected, we establish a deeper trust in our ability, and our intuition becomes better informed. I believe this is the basis for building grounded confidence. When we act this out for years, we can fortify a deeper trust in our intuition and decision-making.

In a Parkour UK article called *The Psychology of Parkour: Prediction, Error, and Self-Efficacy*, ex-Storm member turned cognitive neuroscience PhD, Charlie Havill, explains:

> "This is what people mean when they say parkour is 80% mental. [...] Each session is a process of recalibrating your predictions under uncertainty. Everyone attempting the same jump will be handling a different predictive model in their head. What we, as parkour athletes, are interested in is the process of updating that predictive model to successfully bring about a desired result."

Bart van der Linden speaks to this same effect in a TED Talk about parkour. "When a problem appears, I trust myself that I'm making the right decision to solve the problem, and I'm not only talking about training right now, I mean my whole life. Every aspect of it."

This trust in your decision-making can foster an empowering sense of control and confidence in chaotic, high-stakes situations. I don't think it's too far-fetched to posit that this self-trust and sense of control may even fortify oneself against depression and anxiety. In fact, research shows that anxiety is caused by an inability to tolerate uncertainty. In Charlie Havill's article, he continues:

> "In these conditions [depression and anxiety], the brain's predictive models often skew toward expecting negative outcomes – anticipating failure, danger, or rejection – while filtering out positive surprises. Parkour offers a practical counterbalance. By repeatedly experiencing positive prediction errors (*'that wasn't as bad as I thought'*, *'I actually could do that'*), practitioners train their brains to update pessimistic models with more realistic – and often more optimistic – evidence. Over time, this can strengthen resilience, reduce avoidance, and help shift the balance from fear and doubt toward confidence and agency. Parkour is more than just movement. It's embodied predictive coding training. Every jump is a negotiation between what you expect and what actually happens. Every success against fear is a recalibration—strengthening not only your body, but also your belief in yourself. That's the invisible 80%."

There are many situations in life where we can become overwhelmed and even immobilised by fear, unable to act amid chaos due to a lack of confidence. Our distrust of our ability to act appropriately in novel,

uncertain situations and to move forward in the best way can inhibit us in many aspects of our lives. We can be reluctant even to begin a challenging process, whatever that may be, because dwelling on our pessimistic forecast of all possible adverse outcomes keeps us immobilised. When we adopt a practice of managing risks that directly affect us, we regularly convert unknowns into knowns and chaos into order. We are collecting information and getting direct feedback on our decisions. The reward can be a greater trust in our intuition and judgment, increased self-efficacy, self-awareness, and reduced self-deception. This can imbue us with greater confidence to move forward, step by step, in any task or prolonged, challenging process in life.

In 2016, when we were filming Roof Culture Asia in the skyscraper-dense megacities of Hong Kong, Tokyo and Seoul, we were neck-deep in high-consequence environments, practically every day for six weeks straight. The stakes for making inaccurate predictions about our capabilities in relation to the environment were, of course, very high. Every jump and challenge we completed was a radical affirmation of our skill and airtight decision-making. After that much condensed, high-stakes, high-skin-in-the-game decision-making over such an extended period, we no doubt returned home as changed men.

We Start Together, We Finish Together

Although not only as individuals, but as a group of friends. There is no way a group of seven can go through something like Roof Culture Asia without developing a deeper understanding of one another, a deeper trust, and stronger bonds. Plato supposedly said, "You learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation."

Similarly, Nassim Taleb has written, "If you want to get an idea of a friend's temperament, ethics, and personal elegance, you need to look at him under the tests of severe circumstances, not under the regular rosy glow of daily life."

This is likely because more is brought to the surface in play and struggle than can be intentionally concealed in conversation.

Newer couples, who have only experienced their partners' personalities within the comfortable contexts of dinner dates or snuggled up on the sofa bingeing a Netflix series, may be in for a surprise when they experience each other dealing with all the common stress involved in taking their first vacation together. Suddenly, one may find that their partner's cool, calm, and jovial facade falls apart when an Airbnb booking falls through, some luggage goes missing, or a rental car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. They can reveal their true colours as a hotheaded mess who will shamelessly pass the blame and project their frustration onto anyone within screaming range. Alternatively, they could demonstrate their grace, patience, and emotional resilience and maturity, which will aid in methodically resolving the issue as a team.

Stressful situations make us vulnerable and peel back the superficial layers, allowing the deeper fabric of ourselves to spill out. When we collectively tackle a lofty problem, the mutual vulnerabilities that arise deepen our understanding of one another, fostering stronger connections, empathy, and trust. In retrospect, these situations can turn "a bad time" into "the time we got through together."

When we collaborate to overcome a scary jump, we can see how much it took for each of us to commit. We can see each other's hesitation, fear, excitement, or disappointment in real time. Shared experiences such as these can form the foundation of lifelong bonds—not because they were pleasant, but because they were shared, challenging, and meaningful.

Parkour is an individual sport. What we see in the media is individuals doing incredible things. It is far from a conventional team sport, despite the numerous parkour teams. What often receives less attention is the collaborative aspect of parkour. Everything in this chapter so far has shed light on how parkour can benefit individuals. However, no individual in society lives in a bubble.

David Belle's parkour philosophy was inherently individualistic, focusing on autonomy, strength and confidence. In

contrast, the Yamakasi and the Art Du Déplacement philosophy seem more concerned with social cohesion, sharing, trust, support, and a family spirit. These are concepts that David may have struggled to grasp or value, as Laurent Piemontesi suggests in the FIG chapter when talking about David and Charles Perrière betraying the others for greed: "They do not know how to work in a group, and they do not have this family spirit."

Not only did parkour seem to him a more individualistic pursuit, but various accounts of his attitude during training suggest it was more egotistical. I remind you that he used to break a jump on his own, only to do it later in a group and act as if it were his first time, in an effort to appear superior. In *Breaking The Jump*, Laurent Piemontesi says, "David likes to have the light on him. Yann and the others like it when the light is on everyone, and that makes a big difference."

In an old interview with Les Traceurs member Kazuma, he reflects on the time when training under David's mentorship became increasingly intense. He explains:

> "We started to combine courses with other courses by jumping from roof to roof, arm jumps, descending and landing on walls with precision! And we could no longer afford to wait for a guy who remained stuck on the roof opposite or perched on a wall for two hours! It was David and the guys who were really committed to this new adventure: Romain Moutault, Sisco, Stephane and me."

In the early days of training with David, the atmosphere seemed to be *'keep up or go home'*. This is a stark contrast to the Yamakasi's Art Du Déplacement philosophy. To this day, *"we start together, we finish together"* remains a call-and-response chant heard during any long conditioning challenge at events where the Art Du Déplacement spirit is upheld. Much of the community will laugh at the cult-like image of around one hundred parkourists on all fours, sweating their way through the challenge and yelling their little maxim in unison. However, when you witness these occasions firsthand – or better yet, take part – you realise they are powerful environments for shared struggle and camaraderie.

When those who are stronger reach the finish line, the etiquette is to loop back around and rejoin those who are still struggling. They need not even offer any words of encouragement or support; they will often just be there, on all fours, silently by their side in solidarity, whether they are old friends or someone they've just met that weekend.

It is also very common at these events to see games and challenges that involve teamwork, even if they are as silly and arbitrary as getting someone in the group through a high-and-tight space without touching the edges, or stacking a large tower of tyres. It's random, it's seemingly pointless, but it also requires everyone to work together democratically to improvise a way to complete the challenge.

Perhaps a bigger reason for Laurent's 1001 squats every Sunday is that it creates a space for people to come together and really try hard at something. Every week, he'll have a different group of people sharing the suffering of the same monotonous squats, each supporting each other with smiles on their faces. And once the last rep is complete, that long-awaited, fresh, buttery croissant tastes that much better. The effort, the soreness, and the blissful taste of the crispy croissant are all shared.

The Bristol parkour community is one of the most notorious and respected in the scene. It hosts some of the most skilled and bold (and bald) parkourists who do the most audacious feats at height. Many of them are at the forefront of pushing the pole slide, chimney slide, and descent trends that have swept through the scene, and, through this, have amassed enormous online followings. There is no doubt that they are very clip-centric. Instead of an average training day where we move from established spot to established spot, they will hunt for areas with specific dimensions that offer a level-up for a niche skill they're currently obsessed with. They will meet up and often walk forty-five minutes across the city, with Stella Artois tinnies in hand, to check out a spot where one of them wants to do a fourteen-foot side flip precision. And then once it's complete, and the clip is in the bag,

they will trek another forty-five minutes to a different part of town where another has had their eye on a five-storey-high gargoyle pole slide. After that, they'll head to Castle Park and scran a Tesco meal deal, crack open more tinnies, spark a zoot, and maybe squeeze out a few precisions while waiting for one of them to come back from quickly popping home to get an additional layer of hardwearing clothing needed for a front flip into a four-storey chimney slide. After all is said and done, they'll post their clips from the day on Instagram and sink a few pints at the pub.

This routine may seem an abhorrent tangent from conventional parkour training to any Art Du Déplacement purist. However, in essence, there may be more similarities than they realise.

The level of support and collaboration in these sessions is a rarity elsewhere. For starters, the group has set aside their own training time to walk across the city for someone else's challenge. Then, once they've arrived, all hands are on deck to brush off any grit, sand or moss from takeoff and landing areas, find a wooden pallet or packed-out dumpster if necessary, and generally help prep and talk through the challenge in any way that's needed. Once everything is in order and all that's left is to commit, the others will film, encourage, support, and help swat away any irrational doubts that the one struggling to commit might have. And occasionally, if the police, security, or an angry property owner shows up, one or two guys will keep them talking long enough for the other to commit. Once the trigger is finally pulled and the challenge is complete, the others go absolutely haywire. These electric collaborative training environments are a performance enhancer that verges on jet fuel. They have built a tight-knit community of parkourists they trust fully and will go through hell and back with.

Practically every clip we see coming out of Bristol is a result of full buy-in collaboration. Each Bristolian plays a vital part in the well-oiled clip-churning machine. We see this to varying degrees across the global community. When we're overcoming a challenge, we are rarely alone. Even if it's only you and your friend filming with your phone, you are piecing the puzzle together collaboratively. Quite often, it'll be you and a few others trying to break the same challenge, and each spurs each other on as you all hone in closer to the goal. We build

lines by combining ideas, creating an expressive and playful collaborative exchange. As I've mentioned, this is often the case among competitors in formalised competitions. Not only when cheering each other on or sharing in each other's success, but some will also go the extra mile and act as parkour caddy, giving chalk, wiping down surfaces and offering advice. Effort shared is effort halved.

The *culture of effort* extends beyond celebrating effort for effort's sake. The *culture of effort* is a language we speak to understand one another, to trust one another, to help one another, and to thrive together. Through parkour, we can become fluent.

Summing up the Blah blah

I appreciate that a lot of this chapter seems a whole lot of hard-to-digest blah blah, so, just to recap before moving on:

Parkour can enable us to develop a well-tuned, methodical internal problem-solving process for overcoming challenges.

It can help cultivate a challenge-positive mindset, increasing your willingness to dive into novel and challenging experiences by viewing them as material for growth. Parkour can help us on the road to antifragility in mind, body and spirit. Parkour, as an introspective practice, can offer uninterrupted insights into our minds, allowing us to witness how we process and respond to fear and adversity, and then orient ourselves toward the character traits we admire most. By overcoming fear and managing risk in parkour by aligning our expectations with experience, we can reduce self-deception and develop grounded confidence and trust in our judgment and intuition, thereby enhancing our decision-making abilities. Parkour fosters deeper connections and social cohesion with others through collaborative effort, creating a profound sense of belonging to a community and family.

Beyond all this potential transferable and transformative value, as mentioned previously, parkour is an immensely enjoyable activity in itself. And of course, beyond the doing, there is also the feeling of

accomplishment that transcends merely the intrinsic gratification of the moment. The sense of achievement from core experiences leaves an imprint in our memory; an afterglow that can last a lifetime, creating a sustained, solidified sense of self-esteem. All of the above is what I believe keeps us coming back. This is what parkour does for people. This is what I imagine is at the forefront of our *why*. These moments of voluntary challenge, which require so much of our body and spirit, leave an imprint that gives us deeply meaningful fulfilment.

I know what you may be thinking—there's that darn word again. But what do I even mean by the word *meaningful*?

Meaning Making (Telos)

I don't want to step on anyone's toes or offend anyone's religious worldview, but many will concede to the hard fact that life is inherently meaningless. Humans are a hodgepodge amalgamation of carbon made up of billions of cells and atoms that have just so happened to survive long enough to contemplate themselves and their own cells and atoms.

Time is a purely human construct, and the universe is simply an expansion process set in motion fourteen billion years ago. And our conscious existence is undeniably a very finite and ineffectual part of that process. What we call "time" inevitably destroys us, and our life spans, compared to the cosmic timescale, is like the blink of an eye.

Our inherent purpose can be no more than the baseline biological imperative deeply woven into our primordial DNA: survival and reproduction. This is the basic purpose etched into all living things. Most non-human animals are generally okay with that deal, but we, as a species, have developed the burden of abstract thought and higher self-awareness than others in the animal kingdom, as far as has been found. Our cognitive abilities have evolved to such a level that, in addition to perceiving the world around us, like most other species, we're able to perceive ourselves as well. Which means we perceive ourselves perceiving. This, in turn, gives rise to the self—the

conviction that there's something in our brains having ideas, forming opinions, making decisions and commanding the body. This also gives rise to the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. However, this story could be entirely erased if your memory were suddenly wiped away. Your story would be a clean slate. It would be like you had died and an identical twin was born in your body. Living out our life's timeline is to craft our individual stories. Our perception of this story very often determines our mental states.

Throughout human history, we've come up with all sorts of stuff to make our time more bearable and meaningful so that we don't just feel like, as Rick Sanchez says, "an inert chunk of randomly assembled molecules drifting wherever the universe blows you." For instance, many of us believe that we are special and our existence serves in a universal narrative and a divine plan set in motion and scrupulously overseen by a cosmic dictator of our choosing. As science has slowly yet convincingly explained the universe, these religious belief systems – which have provided a sense of purpose and intrinsic worth – have become increasingly less prevalent. The success of science in explaining the world mechanistically leaves us knowing more than ever, but often feeling the cosmos is indifferent, value-neutral, and cold. Religion and tradition may only serve as delusional distractions from the inherent meaninglessness of our experience on earth, but science and modernity dismantled them without replacing their functional role, leaving us to figure out meaning alone, only for society to witness a steady increase in depression and anxiety amid a milieu of existential crises. The frequency and severity of depression and anxiety have been rising steadily over the last fifty years. Not to mention nihilism, leading people to treat themselves and others like garbage because "nothing matters anyway". Or to slip into pure unbridled hedonism, treating the body like an amusement park, satisfying only the immediate and transient monkey-brained whims. This worldwide decline in faith, tradition, and cultural frameworks of purpose has opened a gaping chasm that John Vervaeke, a Canadian philosopher and cognitive scientist, has labelled the Meaning Crisis.

But it just so happens that the people who are busy giving themselves wholeheartedly to something fulfilling with which they

feel a deep connection don't need to bother themselves with existential questions of *why*. They have their *why* figured out and are busying themselves with it every day. So much so that if asked why they were doing it, the question would seem entirely nonsensical to them.

As does Paul Whitecotton with his answer to the question of why he does parkour in the documentary *People In Motion*, "So, why do I do this? I don't know. I don't think it's really a question of why I do it. It's like one of those things where it feels like the right thing to be doing. As right as it feels that you should be eating something when you're hungry."

These may also seem like mere distractions from the inherent meaninglessness of existence. Maybe objectively, but surely in the case of conscious beings with the level of awareness that we've been imbued, it's the subjective things which are most important. To quote Heinz Von Foerster, "Objectivity is a subject's delusion that observing can be done without him."

In the final chapter of Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi's book, *Flow - The psychology of optimal experience*, he writes:

> "It *is* true that life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal built into the fabric of nature and human experience, a goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be *given* meaning. It is one thing to recognise that life is, by itself, meaningless. It is another thing entirely to accept this with resignation. The first fact does not entail the second any more than the fact that we lack wings prevents us from flying. From the point of view of an individual, it does not matter what the ultimate goal is—provided it is compelling enough to order a lifetime's worth of psychic energy. The challenge might involve the desire to have the best beer-bottle collection in the neighbourhood, the resolution to find a cure for cancer, or simply the biological imperative to have children who survive and prosper. As long as it provides clear objectives, clear action, and a way to concentrate and become involved, any goal can serve to give meaning to a person's life.

> Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience. People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can give significance to their lives. We may refer to this process as *achieving purpose*. Someone who knows his desires and works with purpose to achieve them is a person whose feelings, thoughts, and actions are congruent with one another, and is therefore a person who has achieved inner harmony. Inner congruence ultimately leads to that inner strength and serenity we admire in people who seem to have come to terms with themselves. Purpose, resolution and harmony unify life and give it meaning by transforming it into a seamless flow experience. Whoever achieves this state will never really lack anything else. A person whose consciousness is so ordered need not fear unexpected events, or even death. Every living moment will make sense, and most of it will be enjoyable."

When you're immersed in something meaningful to you, something that feels wholly worthwhile, which resonates with your existence on a foundational level, and puts you on a course of growth in a multitude of aspects, you are forging meaning and purpose for yourself. A large part of what John Vervaeke calls the meaning crisis concerns the lack of this across society as a whole. Some people just do nothing and are thus existentially lost. Humans do not function well without a sense of meaning; an anchor to reality that guides attention, shapes identity, grounds values and enables cooperation. All these things support mental health.

Powerlifting is an absurd sport. The whole pursuit involves lifting the most weight across three simple lifts: squat, bench press, and deadlift. Some intermediate and advanced lifters centre their entire lives and identities around it, only to add 2.5kg to their bench PR every two years. On any hobby-horsing social media post, you're likely to find a near infinite scroll of comments lambasting them. And to be frank, it is a very odd activity. But parkourists also receive similar negativity from people who don't understand what we do. In

my view, whether it's hobby-horsing, powerlifting, Frisbee golf, Magic: The Gathering, Quidditch, or any other odd "*pointless skill*" activity or niche interest—inside me, there are two wolves: one finds them hilarious and utterly ridiculous, and the other one is stoked that the people enthralled by these pursuits have found their thing. And sadly, they must endure the unrelenting laughter and criticism from insecure people online who haven't found theirs.

Of course, not all activities are equal in terms of the breadth of value that people derive from them, but perhaps the highest order of value is in each activity's potential to create a prolonged sense of meaning, empowerment, direction, connectedness, and inner harmony in individuals.

When we view parkour through the lenses of character growth and social connectedness, which give rise to a joyful and meaningful experience, it's easy to concede that what we do is not the movement itself; it's a self-exploratory and self-cultivating practice in its own right that uses movement. Ease of communication demands that we define things, and I think the definition I've given satisfies that need. But beyond this, parkour may be better viewed as an experiential practice that is hard to reduce to simple terms, names, definitions, or any other box people feel obsessively compelled to put it in. It's long been said that it is something that must be practised and felt to be wholly understood. Even if it's not expressed or expressible, its benefits will be absorbed as long as it is experienced and internalised. And I honestly feel like it truly is for many of us to some indeterminate extent. Although if we remain aware and pay attention to these benefits amid the daily process, and block out the thick fog of extrinsic distractions that pull at us from various directions, I believe we can all reap the numerous rewards of our practice and progressively grow into better, more fulfilled people.

Chapter 20 - Divergent Telos

> *"As the exchange of money and physical labour was put at the heart of their parkour careers, it extracted the 'fun' and 'leisurely' element from their parkour lives. Whilst the parkour body is supposed to be free and unbounded by constraints, as capitalism has commodified parkour, it has also commodified and taken control of the body of the traceur, regimenting it as with any other worker under late-capitalism."* -Thomas Raymen - *Deviance and Leisure in The Late-Capitalist City*

In Matthew Marsh's 2009 short film, *Choose Not to Fall*, Daniel Ilabaca says, "Parkour is a tool that can be used for so much good, and it's to become aware of that before it gets too late, to the point where parkour becomes completely physical; it becomes just competition or making money, and the message is lost."

Parkour seems to be in a peculiar state right now. As social media and money seem to progressively pollute the potential underlying value, what we do may increasingly become purely physical, objective, and outcome-based. Maybe the majority of us have hurtled too far down into the abyss that the "message" has been lost already. Perhaps that's another reason why Ilabaca feels as though he wouldn't be interested in parkour if he had discovered it as a kid in today's current state. And why John 'Hedge' Hall is dramatically grieving parkour as if it's already dead. Not only do so many of us seem overly infatuated with the physical side of the practice, rather than its internal effects as an experiential mental practice within a physical movement practice, but many seem, above all else, overly absorbed in using it as a vehicle in the rat race. Although many still fail to recognise that their vehicle is a rusty, haggard, old, and doddery Volvo 240 estate that is in no way fit for the job. The *culture of effort*, as Vincent Thibault calls it, has been continuously sullied by money, social media's effects on us, and our *why*.

A Hard Pill for the Reward Driven Fly-by-night Temps

In an ideal world, we wouldn't have to worry about increasing participation in parkour to improve our industry and financially support talented, emotionally invested parkourists. In an ideal world, we would be content in our little bubble, jumping on walls, having fun doing cool shit, and making culturally heavy videos we can all be stoked on, without having to worry about building a marketable personal online brand or forsaking our principles to work with dubious multinational corporations, and using all kinds of audience-capture tactics to pander to non-practitioners. In an ideal world, we wouldn't have to worry about earning money to survive, and those aspiring to be a professional within the sport wouldn't be led along by the enticing prospect dangling in front of them. Alas, everyone is chained to this greater capitalist system and has to play along. But surely there are ways in which we can avoid compromising our relationship to the sport.

Many parkourists pursue a career in parkour because it's something they're good at and passionate about. The idea of the humdrum repetitiveness of a conventional job disgusts them to the core, often because it detracts from the time they're able to train. So, what we commonly see is them finding a group of like-minded parkourists—they don't necessarily need to be friends with one another; so long as their skills are up to scratch and each already has a large enough following, they fit the bill. They agree on a team name; usually, a combination of any of the following words: flow, street, urban, free, speed, air, revolution, run, runners, gang, boys, team, commit, flight, generation, project, monkey, collective, tracers, traceurs, extreme or any other English word with an X, V or Z in it (because they are the cool letters of the Latin alphabet). They then swiftly release their first videos, followed by their first T-shirts. They plaster their new graphically busy logo onto cheap Gildan tees; then they're all set to start commodifying their training to sell their merch.

Then, a year or two down the line, they are surprised to find that things aren't going as well as they had imagined. Despite all being hot-shit when it comes to jumping on walls, and they've

generated a meagre cult following, their Instagram hasn't taken off, their T-shirts seem to sell almost exclusively to their mates, and each bimonthly YouTube upload gathers around 350 views apiece, which is far below the monetisation threshold. They realise this is unsustainable, so now they decide it's time to up the ante and take this more seriously. They begin releasing weekly vlogs with eye-catching thumbnails and titles to draw a wider audience. The quality of their videos takes a sharp nosedive, but at least it's regular content. Some are uncomfortable switching on a fake, personable, TV presenter-style, YouTube-y persona as soon as the cameras start rolling. They begin to feel disgust and resentment toward those who take it like a duck to water. They invest money in travelling to international jams and competitions to promote their name; however, they feel they receive less respect from the core community since switching up their content. They continue to transition from one idea to another, but all lack consistency and soul. For some, the fun, expression and curiosity have been stripped away from their training, and they feel as though their relationship to the sport has changed.

The Parkour Midlife Crisis

Suddenly, parkour feels like work for *Urban Extreme Project Collective*. The glitz and glamour of the parkour content creator lifestyle turns out to be a lot of work with minimal monetary reward. There is discontent within the group, and disputes have arisen over their new creative direction.

The members of the group are growing up. Their carefree teenage years are now but a fond memory, and the increasing weight of societal expectations and the financial pressures they bring is becoming ever more apparent. They dwell in a financially insecure limbo phase of adultified adolescence. The rent is always late, and it would be nice to eat something other than cheap frozen pizza every night. Their parents express concern about their life decisions, with not-so-subtle prompts to get a real job. Their partners' parents think they are losers and should apply themselves to something more worthwhile. Those who no longer live with their parents are forced to

get jobs, making it harder for the remaining few to dedicate time to the group's videos and projects and to lead the charge.

In a few short years, parkour has shifted from a passion-fuelled lifestyle with high intrinsic value to something perceived as lame, with a monotony that rivals that of a nine-to-five job. Except that parkour actually requires more effort and creativity, and it creates more stress and uncertainty, with next to no return on investment.

This, in essence, is the modern parkourist's midlife crisis! It's generally a pivotal point in most aspiring professional parkourists' lives, where you have to start bucking your ideas up and figuring out how you fit into the world. Eventually, everyone in the Urban Extreme Project Collective grows apathetic and resentful towards parkour as a whole, leading them to go their separate ways.

The *why* behind parkour can become shrouded in a mist of ill-defined outcome-oriented extrinsic goals. There appears to be considerable confusion when parkourists endeavour to blend lifestyle with livelihood. This is why it's so common to see teams, organisations and projects come and go so quickly in parkour. The industry is a revolving door where parkourists enter highly enthusiastic and hopeful, shine brightly for a while, only to come out the other end embittered and jaded, with considerably less love for parkour. Real staying power is genuinely very rare. It's not conditions like patellar tendinopathy that should be our primary concern in the prevailing epidemic of killing off parkourists; it's the parkour midlife crisis. It's a *why* that is not fuelled by unshakeable passion. It's a *why* that is not tightly linked to experience.

I've mentioned that there was a time when being invited amongst the ranks of Storm Freerun was regarded as a huge badge of honour and assumed to be a guaranteed pathway to consistent professional work. A few have joined Storm with the expectation of being made men, with a calendar brimming with various events, brand deals, and ad campaign shoots. This was indeed a big part of the image they cultivated early on, particularly with their debut video, *Storm Freerun - Volume 1*. However, once within this prestigious fold of elites, things looked somewhat different. The faucet of commercial work and other

opportunities was at a drip. Behind the curtain, the work consisted of tedious administrative duties, scheduling clothing posts, maintaining a steady stream of YouTube content—most of which they abhorred—and other repetitive tasks. They were sidelined by the fact that much of what made being a parkour professional did not involve doing parkour. And although Storm were viewed from the outside as the big dog at the top of the pyramid, they were struggling to keep its head above water.

In a Storror Podcast, Charlie Havill spoke about his time in Storm Freerun and how it jaded his entire outlook on parkour. He eventually left Storm and parkour behind, got a job at Costa Coffee and enrolled at university. Fortunately, a few sessions with Dodds in Plymouth reacquainted him with classic street rat degeneracy, which pulled him from the brink and acted as a remedy to his jaded outlook.

Charlie explained, "Going and seeing Dodds, I was like, oh, parkour's not shit. Parkour's not lame. The way I was doing it was fucking lame. I didn't have any respect for what I was doing. I inherently did NOT respect the route I'd taken within the sport. What am I doing here?"

Now, six years on, Charlie is pursuing a PhD in cognitive neuroscience at the University of Sussex while remaining a staple of the Brighton parkour scene, with a healthy, sustainable relationship to the sport. The same cannot be said for other previous members of Storm Freerun.

Passion Fuelled Volunteers (Autotelic Zeal)

Please understand me; I don't want to dissuade anyone from experimenting and taking risks to move our industry in a positive direction. Parkour content creators are also undoubtedly an essential part of promoting our culture. Storror are an example of this. And fortunately, a financially sustainable one (for now). For years, we have shared media palatable to the masses, broadening the sport's appeal while often showcasing core aspects of our culture. I don't take for granted our place within the community as a conduit between our community and the general population. Storror's videos are

responsible for so many people starting parkour. It would demonstrate an appalling lack of self-awareness on my part not to acknowledge how vital a role this can be. We certainly need more groups like Storror, Schlappen, and Team Phat to break through to a wider audience of non-parkourists.

Yet much of the sickest parkour media comes from those who don't seem overly concerned with making it their career. They won't be the groups that will continually return to the drawing board to painstakingly come up with the next hare-brained scheme to go viral. They won't be the groups that will flip-flop between regular clickbait videos and uploading nothing at all. They will just train, do sick shit, film it, share it on Instagram or collect clips for an unadulterated culture-heavy video piece. Yeah, sure, only three or four thousand people may see it, but it'll be three or four thousand of the right people. These authentic videos will encourage others within our bubble to be more creative and legitimate. Some produce other forms of culture-heavy media, such as magazines and zines like Müvmag and Kipa. Some podcasts provide news, ideas, thoughts, and discourse on current topics for those in our scene or on the periphery. These are all core cultural contributions motivated solely by a sheer love of the game. Those who produce media and host community events that push our culture deserve a massive round of applause. They are putting money and effort into something with minimal reward, other than the fact that it is their passion and a source of fulfilment and self-expression. They may be working part-time or full-time jobs around their training, or even studying at university, to secure a more stable future than a career in parkour can offer. And all the while, parkour has remained something that gives them great value, untarnished by the waning prospect of commodifying their practice and using it solely to pay the bills. Unburdened by the need to create cheap content that panders to non-practitioners, the media they produce remains decent and authentic and is consistently well received by the community, as they contribute inspiration and value to the scene.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes people who are internally driven and who exhibit a sense of purpose and curiosity as autotelic. An autotelic person requires few material possessions and little

entertainment, comfort, power, or fame, as much of what they do is already inherently rewarding. These are the workhorses and heroes of our community who deserve our deepest respect, as they will likely lead us into a period where parkour has a more legitimate industry surrounding it.

The prospect to live off parkour has been dangled in front of many of us and romanticised as a conceivable possibility. We've seen in the past with Storm, Urban Freeflow, Farang, Tempest and us at Storror that it is actually attainable. The truth is, anyone from these groups will tell you that it's a struggle to reach and maintain a stable position. Contrary to what many may assume, Storror's business model is currently not majorly profitable, despite reaching what some may perceive as the top of the pyramid. As I've mentioned in previous chapters, it's a long and winding road with many speed bumps just to achieve a steady state, where you're not scraping pennies together to cover the costs of running the business and make the next rent payment.

If you're committed to this pursuit, I only urge you to work towards a plan B simultaneously. Because if it eventually doesn't work out for you, and you wind up like Urban Extreme Project Collective, you could be left with nothing. And even if you work towards a stable income with parkour, there always remains a possibility that it can be ripped away from you with an injury or some other unforeseeable event. And, needless to say, if you fail to secure a plan B, for a high-performing pro parkourist in a competitive industry, the shelf life is relatively short. If it's hard to maintain a certain level of physical output in your teens and twenties, it will only become more challenging in your thirties. And sadly, you don't stop needing money to survive in society when you're thirty-five. Some of you may already have heard enough of this negative talk from your parents, but sadly, in many ways, they are right.

This may all seem like unbearable pessimism. But some may be familiar with the adage, "A pessimist is simply an optimist with experience." Of course, I acknowledge the irony of this coming from someone for whom the professional pursuit is currently going

reasonably well. However, I was fortunate that my unwavering passion sustained me for the years when I made no money from parkour. It took seven years with Storror until I received even a meagre monthly salary. It was indeed a lot of hard graft, ploughing on with no clear avenue for sustainability in sight, amid being in and out of part-time work. Still, it was also undoubtedly an unbelievable amount of luck that we've arrived at where we are today. If events had turned out slightly differently, and nothing came of Storror, I would be left with no plan B.

Creating apathy is far from my intention. I only worry that endeavouring to become a pro might ruin parkour for you, only because I've seen it happen to many in the past.

For some, once they drop the heavy burden of the professional pursuit, they fall in love with parkour all over again. Like Charlie Havill, they remember how much it means to them and what attracted them in the first place, without the extrinsic, measurable motivators of followers and concerns about monthly income.

Many are making a massive difference to our sport and scene without earning a dime. If your end goal is money and not much else, you're in the wrong industry. You can ingest as many self-affirming, rise-and-grind, believe-and-achieve, destiny-manifesting, law-of-attraction, billionaire-mindset memes on Instagram as you like. Parkour is still, at this moment in time, an arid wasteland of an industry. If your motivations for doing it drift further and further beyond the actual act itself, the act itself will feel less fulfilling. And if the extrinsic, outcome-based goals that motivate you progressively become less feasible, hope deteriorates, and motivation to train wanes.

The hard truth is, once again, the universe doesn't owe you anything for being good at parkour. You aren't owed a living just because you've put over 10,000 hours into cultivating a skill. I sincerely believe that if you're talented at parkour, you're a genius. You are, without question, a genius. However, not in the conventional sense. Attaining such a high skill level requires a high level of intelligence. Many musicians are also geniuses. Yet many never reach stardom or even earn a living wage from their hard-won skills, even though their art positively affects the lives of many people. Sadly,

some forms of genius are not as monetisable as that of an exploitative big-shot CEO. (In fact, many CEOs are nepo babies who are as thick as pig shit!)

To attain money for something, you must deliver something of value in exchange. Yes, parkour content is of great value—as is music—but it's also freely abundant on practically every online platform. It has become saturated on social media, and you're never more than a few clicks away from seeing some of the most outrageous world-class parkour clips. What's so special about yours? And what value are you adding to people's lives with it that goes beyond the norm? And why should it be worth paying for if 100,000 other schmucks are giving away their videos for free?

Spreading Value

In August 2021, The Motus Projects posted a video to their Instagram promoting their new podcast, using the introductory soundbite where Giles Campbell Longley says, "I'm fired up. This is gonna be one of those podcasts that's probably short and sweet but very actionable, and it's gonna make you some money, dollar, some skrillah, some fucking cheddar!"

It piqued my curiosity, and I fell prey to the clickbait, so I gave it a listen. Giles had a profound epiphany while walking his dog and rushed back to rouse Kelan from his Minecraft-induced delirium to record a podcast. Without overselling it, the idea was for parkour photographers to provide value by following famous parkourists and snapping photos of their history-making feats, so they could sell a few posters. Essentially, they recorded this podcast to inspire photographers to fill this untapped gap in our industry. Upon listening, I couldn't help but firmly facepalm. Given all I've mentioned in the last two chapters, I think we can do better than posters.

For a sport that has the potential to give people so much value, we certainly suck at realising that value, harnessing it, and passing it on. Being an online star and selling T-shirts seems to be the best model we can muster for providing value to the world. I don't think posters are a monumental step up from that. I believe we, as a

community and culture, have more to offer that is worthier of monetary exchange. As Flynn Disney writes in his essay, *Parkour and sharing value:*

> "The range and diversity of experiences one can encounter in parkour is unique, and in this way, it has the potential to be a source of learning and value quite unlike anything else. But for some reason (perhaps the same reason why cats are famously so difficult to herd), this value appears to be locked immobile within specific individuals in the community."

There's a side of our industry that is largely dismissed. Yet it has excellent potential to deliver the most concentrated level of value and provide a more stable, sustainable income for parkourists. Teaching parkour is widely overlooked, and many of us assume it's an unfulfilling, thankless job. Sometimes it certainly can be, when, for example, a parent drops off their snot-nosed little bastard to a class, while they go off for an iced oat mocha and catch their breath from looking after the runt. Some kids would rather be playing Fortnite in a dimly lit room than engage in any kind of vigorous activity with other kids in the real world. However, when you are a good coach and can lead an engaging class that captivates a group eager to learn, it can be intensely rewarding. Especially if you're able to keep them under your tutelage long enough to see them no longer need you and they become seamlessly absorbed into the local community.

Many young students will be dropped off at classes against their will, seeing the whole pursuit as difficult and pointless, and then do nothing but disrupt the class. It is the coach's job to *sell* parkour to these unruly, unenthusiastic students. The coach must facilitate small emotional wins that will win students over and help them appreciate how fun and rewarding parkour can be. The ability to convert sceptical beginners is the most crucial sign of a good parkour coach.

Granted, coaching may not be as far-reaching as the large YouTube viewership you might amass over time. Still, the quality of what is shared and experienced will be far more meaningful if the coach can drip into their sessions anything from the previous chapter.

The experience will affect the person immeasurably more profoundly than seeing an Instagram reel of a hodgepodge line with a cart full at the end. And potentially, just maybe more than a video titled *Assassin's Creed vs Goku parkour in real life - feat fidget spinners and... fuck it, Pokémon GO as well, just in case.* Parkour media can light a spark, but it can often lead nowhere without kindling and tinder. A parkour coach's job is to turn that spark into a fully fledged fire and keep it burning for years to come.

With coaching, you can see first-hand the value you're giving people. Good coaching spreads parkour in a way that cultivates confident, creative people with a well-balanced approach to risk and a healthy mindset toward challenge and uncertainty. It encourages students to work together and support each other. Needless to say, it also improves their fitness and movement literacy and gets them off their screens for a short period.

If you genuinely wish to pursue parkour as a career, it may be worth considering which aspects of parkour are valuable to you and then finding a way to share them with others. That doesn't have to be the classic group classes or one-on-one sessions either. I think our general idea of coaching is confined to such a narrow, played-out scope. So many people see coaching and workshops only for absolute beginners, but who is to say that even as an experienced parkourist, you can't learn anything from another parkourist with a similar level of experience? Or even someone at a level generally below yours.

I believe there needs to be a shift in attitude. I think a lot of us feel that we're beyond being coached because we've reached a certain level already. There's a subtle arrogance inherent to our culture in this sense. I have been invited to participate in numerous classes as a student, and occasionally I have approached them with the mindset of, "Yeah, sure, I'll join in with the other students for a bit of fun, not that it'll bring me anything new." And practically every time this has happened, I've come away having so much fun, learnt a lot, and I've been massively humbled by having significant gaps and faults exposed in my training. And I often had experiences that changed my perspective on training and opened me up to many more possibilities at spots that would have otherwise remained slightly more stale.

What we do is so broad that, regardless of our current abilities, we can always learn from others, as there are numerous unique perspectives and skill sets to absorb. If, for example, we attended a workshop on creative line building and improvisation hosted by Kevin Franzén or Matt McCreary, we would certainly come away with a wealth of value that could transform our entire outlook and parkour vision. Imagine workshops where you can learn swings from Tim Champion, Nico Vanhole, Darryl Stingley or Jared Nahulu.

Although parkour is so varied, we all specialise in specific ways and hone in on a few aspects of the sport. So in a workshop, when we're introduced to someone else's speciality, we can often be taken aback and humbled by an unexplored avenue of movement. Not only that, but applicable concepts surrounding movement, such as creativity, overcoming fear, collaborative creation, longevity, and strength and conditioning, can also be explored. Nowadays, many of us are willing to spend £60 on parkour clothing, but few are prepared to pay that much for a workshop or a weekend intensive. We shouldn't be so hasty to close the door to being a student to other students of movement, because you will more than likely have something to gain from their path and their practice.

These types of workshops and events are nothing new and have been happening for a long time. There have been numerous smaller-scale events in which a single parkourist, or a handful of parkourists, is flown to gyms to deliver workshops to communities. There have been parkourists who have funded workshops and tours themselves to share ideas and overarching themes. For example, Stephane Vigroux's *Parkour Origins* courses, Joseph Henderson's *Strong Minds* tour, Flynn Disney's *Exploration Group* and Dylan Baker's *Inner Mastery* events. It's a shame not to see this level of shared value on a broader scale. It doesn't have to start with a tour, a gym, or anything grand, which involves more precarious and complicated overheads and profit margins. What is stopping respected parkourists from setting up their own sessions in their town or city, or the next closest city?

Movement Culture (the Ido Portal functional movement community) has a very different outlook on coaching and learning than ours. Their

culture is far more willing to part with their cash to attend weekend intensive workshops, where they will listen to an *elite* movement generalist over-intellectualise breakdance-derived cartwheels, overcomplicate breathing, play convoluted games, and perform superfluous drills with tennis balls on strings. These weekend intensives can cost around $250, or occasionally exceed $5,000 for retreats under the premium tutelage of their exalted generalist god-king, Ido Portal himself. Although Movement Culture may be a highly capitalistic community of exploitative coaches taking advantage of naive and contrarian middle-class fitness enthusiasts and pseudo-intellectuals, they undoubtedly capture the concepts they consider valuable and assign a price tag to them. (Though the concepts are often grasping at straws and are rarely grounded in science, and the price tags are extortionate and said to be disproportionate to the value shared.) Suppose we can tap into even a fraction of Movement Culture's willingness to spread and receive value, except without the tennis balls on strings and the farcical costs that make it completely inaccessible to the less privileged. In that case, we can open up more financial pathways for those seeking to establish coaching as a legitimate profession.

This type of sharing value to active participants or beginners, unlike the spectacle of bite-sized Instagram clips aimed at passive consumers, holds a much deeper, embodied value that is arguably far more worthy of financial exchange. Having more classes in various areas creates more effective pathways into the sport for those inspired by online videos.

I'm far from claiming to have all the answers, and I'm certainly not saying that any form of coaching will make you a millionaire (unless you're Ido Portal). Still, I believe we can be more creative regarding making parkour a viable livelihood. And, of course, regarding spreading value, we can definitely do better. I believe that if we continue to build our coaching industry, we can hit three birds with one stone: create more sustainable financial pathways, effectively expose people to the deep well of value within the sport, and foster a fulfilling lifestyle for our professionals who are dedicated to sharing the value that is locked up in the vast container that is parkour.

Chapter 21 - Parkour is for Everyone

Now that we've explored the potential value of what we do, you might agree that these are all things everyone would benefit from. If everyone adopted parkour and set out to embody all it offers, in theory, we would probably have a pretty strong and happy population.

Parkour is freely accessible to everyone. It's simply moving with obstacles. It's building upon what your body can do using the environment. You don't need anything other than yourself and a space. You can do it alone if you have no friends. If it can provide so much value and it's practically the most accessible activity on earth, then why don't more people around the world adopt it? There are undoubtedly several factors that act as barriers to entry.

Danger!

In a *Parkour UK* article titled, *A Mum's Perspective on Parkour*, Julie Standen opens saying:

> "Your child has expressed an interest in learning parkour; you don't know anything about it, so like most parents, you turn to the internet to find out more. You Google "parkour videos," and the first video that is recommended to you is 'the world's best parkour and free running.' It has 130 million views, so it must be a good indicator of what parkour is, right? Within the first 30 seconds, you're shown someone doing a handstand on a roof edge, balancing on a rail at height, and someone walking on the edge of a roof! As parents, we do everything we can to keep our children safe. Is this sport something you want your child to take part in? Is it even a sport at all?"

The public views parkour as a dangerous activity. Because... parkour is dangerous. Many in our community seem to try to sweep this fact under the rug. It doesn't matter how many times you try to sell the idea that it's safe to members of the public whilst you cling to a drain pipe three storeys above them. Or after you have just flailed through the air and clattered onto your back in a heap because you botched your take off for a side flip precision.

It is, without a doubt, dangerous.

There have been numerous times where I've tried to explain to police or security how what we're doing is safe, and whilst pleading my case, my scabby and scar-pocked shins are on full display. It was an even harder sell whenever Sacha was there with crutches after breaking his leg. We express that parkour is safe, whilst many of us have suffered from various traumatic acute injuries. We emphasise that parkour is safe, even though approximately seventy per cent of our conversations revolve around injuries. We say that parkour is safe when countless fail clips and compilations litter the internet. We say that parkour is safe while also applauding Roof Culture Asia, Joe Scandrett, who performs the highest and gnarliest car park descents and pole slides, and Dom Tomato, who appears to be slowly killing himself.

Even in David Belle's book, he says, "You don't come to Parkour thinking there is no danger or risk to be hurt—there is. It's as if someone wanted to learn boxing and was stunned because he got a broken nose."

What we really mean is that we do our best to responsibly manage the risk to avoid succumbing to the consequences of danger. Some, of course, do this a lot better than others.

More recently, what I've said to people is, "It's more often as dangerous as you make it." Compared with other sports, there is a lot more within our control. No one is aiming to collide with us to steal an egg-shaped ball. We're not in a ring with someone else trying to punch us in the face. Meanwhile, globally accepted and celebrated sports, which are basically sanctioned violence, such as American football and rugby, see practically epidemic rates of incidents of

concussions and chronic traumatic encephalopathy. And some of them are taught in PE curricula in schools around the world.

In contrast, we choose our own challenges and commit to them at our own leisurely pace. We are making the decisions and can control how dangerous we want to be. We are the ones who will let our judgment of our abilities become clouded by the opinions of our peers or random onlookers in the street. We are the ones taking unnecessary risks solely for Instagram notoriety.

Some go for years without experiencing any injuries. However, mistakes are inevitable. Even rare, gnarly mistakes still occur at the least expected times for those who are predominantly careful. Although many of us might train a bit more carefully, there are inevitably others who don't. There will always be those with little experience and too much arrogance and cojones for their own good. These types are too often the ones starring in the fail compilations that circulate online. It's only natural that parkour attracts those destined to receive a *Darwin Award* (Google it). And the underlying motive of accruing followers and clout only further pollutes people's decision-making. This is more overtly evident with anomalies like Cork Boy. Many will defend the young Vietnamese Trọng Hiếu for various reasons – and I get it, there's undoubtedly something weirdly lovable about him – but it's clear that something is off regarding why he pushes himself as he does. In a few of his videos, you can see him sip from a Red Bull can, looking down the lens as if into the eyes of a Red Bull talent scout and saying, "sponsor me, pls", before then yelling, "CORK BOY LET'S GO!!!" Then more often than not, he goes on to demolish himself. (In 2024, Germany's Gunnar Floyd left no room for interpretation of his motivations when he screamed, "Red Bull! I want to be your next athlete!" after flipping the iconic Lyon 25 stair set.) However, when doing parkour, your recklessness usually affects only you.

Throughout the years, many parkourists have tried to gatekeep decision-making, assuming that everyone will subscribe to the same values of longevity and *être et durer* (to be and to last). It's ironic, since these are often the same parkourists who claim parkour is an individual sport. With every Capstone video release, you can see comments or story posts condemning and chastising their approach,

even though their videos only ever host some of the most experienced in the scene.

If your ideas and assumptions surrounding another's decision-making and how much risk they appear to be taking don't align with how much you deem worthwhile, meaningful or sensible—remember, those are your own ideas and values.

As should be clear by now, I believe parkour benefits more from a broader range of styles and values, and no single way of practising the sport reigns supreme. To attempt to shape the sport with one's own favoured values encourages homogeneity in a broad and rich sport. And the bottom line is that, since our decisions only affect us, parkourists should remain free to make their own decisions and either reap the rewards or learn from the consequences.

Many who criticise *send culture* and admonish people's decision-making with a seemingly sensible risk-reward ratio rhetoric are the kind of parkourists who may never come close to experiencing the true limits of what they're actually capable of. If this sounds like you and you are comfortable with your current ability, pace of progression and relationship to uncertainty, that's fine. If you're not comfortable with it, try adjusting the send dial slightly. Maybe you will do more things you're proud of.

It is as dangerous as you make it. The decisions are within our hands and affect only us. We have the freedom to make our own choices, good or bad.

Driving a car is inherently dangerous. A quick search reveals that "Road crashes cause between 20-50 million non-fatal injuries around the world, every year. Road traffic crashes now represent the eighth leading cause of death globally." As for fatalities, "Every year, more than 1.35 million people die on the world's roads." Drivers hurtle through densely populated city streets at 40mph in a tin can weighing over a ton, with their family in the passenger seats, with the potential risk of a juggernaut decimating all of them. Or they could suddenly sneeze at the wheel and careen onto the pavement and mow down a handful of unsuspecting pedestrians. Again, driving a car safely is less dangerous. Driving like a moron at double the speed limit, with hot coffee precariously nestled between your thighs, whilst texting, whilst also on meth, is a bit more dangerous. The passengers

on a packed-out double-decker bus are putting their lives in the hands of the crusty geezer operating it. They are trusting a total stranger's competency to get them across the city in one piece. However, being a safe driver doesn't eliminate the possibility of getting T-boned at a junction by a juggernaut driven by a meth addict with a pollen allergy and spilt hot coffee burning their legs.

When reading research on injury rates in sports, you find that parkour typically falls around the lower end or mid-range of the spectrum when compared with other sports in terms of injuries per 1,000 hours of practice. One study found 1.7 injuries per 1,000 hours, whereas another survey-based study found 5.5 injuries per 1,000 hours. The studies suggest parkour has lower injury rates than basketball, football, rugby, skateboarding, running and even badminton. Some studies vary in their sample sizes, practitioners' experience levels, training versus competition, and definitions of injury (severity and time off from practice). However, what's clear is that parkour is far less dangerous than it's often perceived and presented. Football and basketball have dramatically higher injury rates across the research. Yet, there are never any alarmist news headlines about how football is a daredevil adrenaline junky craze that is sweeping the nation. And parents are far more likely to take their kids to football than parkour classes. And they will drive them there despite the risk of being T-boned by a juggernaut...

Most people have now seen or heard of parkour, but they likely only see the bare minimum of what we do. It's no wonder they don't understand how we manage risk. Nor would they have any reason to trust you—an obscenely dressed street urchin, ten feet up on a wall, with your eyes intensely fixated on an edge of another wall thirteen feet away. Of course, you can expect passing comments like, "You're gonna break your bloody neck if you do that!"

If parkour is a practice for improving your body's ability to move with the environment, then if you practice it safely, you can do things with high consequences at minimal risk. In the past, I've written about the difference between risk and consequence. The consequence is the objective hazard, and the risk is the likelihood of it happening. For example, high consequences include plummeting to

your doom, impalement, landing on your neck and breaking it, etc. Low consequence being stubbing your toe or a minor ankle impingement (better known throughout the community as The Ankle Thing) or even, as in so many cases, you come up short on landing and bounce off completely unscathed and ready to go again.

As an example of one extreme end of the risk/consequence spectrum, if we have someone looking at a ten foot level cat pass precision over a fifty storey drop, from a thin wall, at night, to a corrugated plastic roof that our hypothetical parkourist hasn't checked is sturdy enough to bear their weight, they have only ever made a three foot level cat pass before in a soft gym environment, they are known often to miss their hands on the take off wall, and has next to no experience undershooting or catching themself should they not get their feet to the top of the wall. Oh, and they're on meth too. Needless to say, this is an equation for great peril, and if our hypothetical parkourist sends this one, they will surely perish.

Put simply: very high risk of failure + very high consequence = very dead if they were to commit.

A more realistic example is if our hypothetical parkourist is at ground level, they're sizing up a three-and-a-half-foot cat pass over a flowerbed, and the walls aren't so thin that they might miss their hands. And, fortunately, this time they are sober. In this case, the risk may still be high for coming up short and bouncing off, as it is slightly larger than they've done before and is also not on soft gym blocks. They could still slip out onto their butt on landing, take off too close, or slip with their hands on take off. The risk may still be high, but the consequences are reasonably low. They may bonk a knee, scrape their butt, or, even worse, receive angry complaints from local residents about flattening the flowers.

A simple example of very low risk but fairly high consequence is a backflip on flat ground performed by someone who's done thousands of them in the past. The potential consequence is landing on their face, neck, back or knees, but the likelihood of that occurring is practically non-existent for someone who has ingrained the motor pattern over many years.

Every parkourist uses this internal risk-to-consequence equation to some extent, even if it is mostly subconscious. This is

selective risk-taking. Some are better at it than others, but most parkourists don't want to get hurt. And most aren't so arrogant as to assume that they can immediately do the most outrageously technical and consequential thing that they've seen in videos without prior practice. I think there is enough evidence of this in the fact that so few people have actually died whilst training at height. We are way less likely to make mistakes at height because the glaringly obvious hazard keeps us acutely focused on every minute detail of our movement and the surfaces we use. As an analogy, walking in grass littered with dog shit is risky, as you're likely to step in shit eventually. But then it gets far less risky when you're walking on the grass whilst paying attention to where you're stepping. Much of what we do, with high consequences, carries an ever-so-little risk of failure. We tend to perform only what we know is well within our capabilities when high consequences are involved. Even then, we scrupulously agonise over every minor detail that may increase the risk of failure. At ground level, mistakes are more common because the perceived consequence is lower. Lower perceived consequence can lead to less respect for what we're doing, making us far more blasé about the details, and more likely to "step in shit". Most of the time, the worst that can come of these mishaps is a bruise, scrape, or sprain. This doesn't mean there aren't potential deadly hazards hiding at ground level. You can still pull off a sixty-kilogram slab of concrete onto your head as Spencer Edwards did in 2023.

Let's not forget, it's good that parkour has elements of risk and danger. It's valuable feedback when you make a mistake, and it keeps you grounded in reality, thus preventing more consequential future mistakes—remember Nassim Taleb's analogy, "Small forest fires periodically cleanse the system of the most flammable materials, so they do not have the opportunity to accumulate. Systematically preventing forest fires from taking place to be safe makes the big ones much worse."

As I've said, to reap the rewards of parkour, we must be willing to encounter some risk to improve our risk management skills. The danger in parkour makes it feel meaningful and transformative because we're dealing with something very real. If we were facing

mentally challenging parkour challenges while playing Storror Parkour Pro, or even in a realistic VR world, it would be nowhere near the same experience and have far less value because of the distinct lack of skin in the game. Selective risk-taking and overcoming fear in the face of danger are how we derive the most value from parkour, both experientially and by building greater confidence and trust in our intuitive decision-making. In my opinion, the best sports are those that involve fear, risk and consequences. The process of dealing with risk and consequence is often where the gold is.

Explaining why that's a worthwhile pursuit to a sedentary layperson can be a challenging task. After all, what do people see when they witness parkour in the media? Chances are, the parkour footage that has penetrated their social media algorithm showcases the sport's most dramatic spectacles. (That, or Bob Reese, Nick Provost, Calen Chan and Kirya Kolesnikov, which deters people in different ways.) It's more commonly something that looks very dangerous, very elite and utterly inaccessible to the average viewer. From the average viewer's perspective, this only perpetuates the idea that this is the epitome of what parkour is—an exclusive sport for elite, daredevil young males. We know that what they're seeing is the pinnacle of what some of our best have accomplished. What they're seeing is the result of a long process of managing risks to a point where we feel confident and safe enough to commit. Non-practitioners seldom consider the countless hours of training that occur behind the scenes, as we push ourselves incrementally and carefully to eventually reach that point. Which is odd, as they wouldn't extend the same assumption to other elite established sports. No one assumes that an adept skier started on black diamond slopes. No one thinks that Tony Hawk was magically always able to do the 900. No one assumes that Alex Honnold put on some climbing shoes one day on a whim and started up El Capitan with no ropes.

Changing society's ideas about the dangers of parkour is no easy task, as it would be difficult to achieve without first changing society's views on dangerous activities entirely. Society has an increasingly warped view of risky activities, as we continue to bubble-wrap the population, not only to reduce harm but to avoid lawsuits. It is all too common to see warnings and disclaimers preceding

documentaries, TV shows or YouTube videos showcasing action sports or anything dangerous, claiming that, "This features stunts performed by professionals and under the supervision of professionals. Do not attempt to recreate or re-enact what you see at home." This lacks so much context and can perpetuate the mindset that only special, gifted elites can pull off these so-called stunts. But how do these gifted elites get to where they are? Is there anything inherently special about these elites beyond the countless hours of careful and deliberate training that led them to that point?

Tom Taylor offers an alternative disclaimer that is more realistic, which reads, "These stunts were performed by ordinary people, just like you, who developed their skills over time, through trial and error. You can attempt to recreate and re-enact what you see through careful practice and progression from the ground up. Do try this at home."

Everyone practising parkour today was smart enough to realise this fact when they began training and has passed through the risk-averse societal barrier that continues to ward many people off. They saw the spectacle of parkour and, rather than thinking, "That looks rad, but I'd break my neck if I tried that. Nope, not for me, thanks." Or, "That's pointless and insane! They must have a death wish!" Those training today instead concluded, "Oh gee whiz! That looks fun! I wonder if I can one day do something at least half as cool as that."

Everyone training today was curious enough to start navigating the daunting, confusing beginner phase, and, piece by piece, they realised they were more capable than they expected. And what's more, the process is enjoyable.

We are only one small community that may be ill-equipped to change the conversation on the benefits of engaging in activities involving risk management, but what we can do is try to show that people don't need to be extraordinarily skilled or push themselves to the stage of life or death to reap the many rewards of sports like parkour. Rafe Kelley once said, "To denounce parkour in its entirety based on its extreme elements would be similar to refusing to drive your own car because you saw a dangerous-looking NASCAR race."

Just because some have reached a point where they can perform near-inhuman feats in high-consequence settings doesn't mean the average person has no place striving to become better at piloting their body in their environment.

Comparison is the Thief of Joy

The abilities of our top parkourists have progressed to an absolutely mind-blowing level. The rate at which skill levels are developing in all directions, globally, is truly remarkable. It's utterly terrifying to imagine what the future holds. It's undeniable that our community is producing world-class elite athletes. It's fair to say that no humans throughout history have ever pushed the ability of the body in its environment to the point that we're witnessing now.

As more people take up parkour, the talent pool grows, and we're seeing youngsters like Elis Torhall from Sweden consistently upping the game with bar tricks, flips to precisions and style lines in competition. The Manpower gap in Évry has now been gainered by France's Leonardo Roof. Teddy Ponceau and Soma have also double-sideflipped the gap. The then-groundbreaking Kong Gainer that Daniel Ilabaca first landed in 2007 is now a commonplace, throwaway move. It has now been landed as a double flip by Travis Verkaik, Elis Torhall and Calen Chan. Not only that, but the three of them have been progressing kong gainers to precision. Shea Rudolph has even done one to a rail in competition. Connor Pennington has done a kong gainer to walk-out diagonally down a set of stairs. And Calen Chan and Nathaniel Trier have done a screwdriver kong gainer full—a 360 dive into a kong gainer 360. If you were to go back in time to 2009 and tell the average parkourist about any of these milestones, they simply would laugh you out of the room.

Emmanuel Nasshan is pushing heavily into the mental side, spitting in the bony face of death with his consistent cool-headed ability, performing progressively harder sideflip precisions, 360 precisions, and running precisions with mortal consequences on the rooftops of Paris.

Aside from the enormous physical and mental milestones, innovative movement ideas are piling up exponentially, and we're seeing extraordinary developments almost daily. In fact, daily, when Egg is concerned. They have posted little nuggets of ideas for thousands of days in a row, each time contributing to and expanding the creative well of our sport. The parkour hive-mind collective consciousness is progressing at an alarming rate. Almost every single scroll on Instagram, you can witness astounding mental, technical and physical feats that push human potential in unprecedented ways. And in doing so, inspire and invite other parkourists to do the same. We can only hope that this momentum carries on into the future. However, as we proceed down this path, we are, unwittingly and through no fault of our own, making our sport seem progressively more exclusive and inaccessible to those who may be curious about trying it.

Parkour has the potential to be immeasurably valuable to everyone, regardless of whether they reach a level considered elite. It is a shame that people can be led to feel as though it's not for them due to their age, gender, body type or current level of physical fitness.

Sadly, you see it everywhere. Society has cultivated an exclusionary mindset toward sports in general, leading people to believe that if you're not talented in an activity, it's not for you. In physical education in schools around the world, children undergo a rigorous selection process that separates the gifted from the less gifted. In many cultures, sport is no longer just about letting children enjoy gymnastics, track and field, football, swimming, or basketball. It's about weeding out the vast majority of participants who aren't good enough to make the team and focusing efforts and resources on only the most proficient students. The result is the polarisation of the population. Much of today's athletic culture divides our population into two segregated groups: a handful of elite, physically gifted individuals with the prospect of becoming professionals, and everyone else—the spectators, fans, and consumers. The small population of physically talented individuals are usually pushed forward into specialisation and leagues with the spoon-fed incentives of medals, collegiate scholarships and, if they're really hot-shit and aren't burnt

out by this point, a contract with a national pro league. Only to usually come out the other end bent up and broken, overworked with all manner of chronic malaise. Although still relatively young, their time in sport is considered done and dusted, leading them to either take on another inactive position within the industry or become one of the lowly spectators and patrons. The current prevalent model is, in essence, sport as a mass entertainment product: not something the average person does, but something they pay for, not something for personal joy, but a spectacle. Industry and financial incentives have eroded the intrinsic value of sport for everyone.

I spent a short time coaching gymnastics, and the environment was not one of enjoyment. The coaches' highest priority seemed to be centred on cultivating disciplined child athletes and stifling any frivolous behaviour that verged on typical childhood play. While in Gdansk, Poland, for a parkour event, I witnessed a head coach go absolutely haywire at a team of young gymnasts, all under the age of ten. The coach was screaming at the young girls that their performance was trash and they would be humiliated at the upcoming competition if they didn't up their game. It was extremely tense and chilling to watch how distorted sport can become when the outcome prevails over all else, to the point that some of the poor girls started crying. You can imagine parents also imprinting their outcome-driven will onto their children. No matter how much the child protests and expresses their disdain for the sport, parents often force them back into the highly disciplined, usually punitive environment.

On the other hand, the unfit and untalented majority who don't make the team, and are the rejects of this carefully constructed elite funnelling system, are assigned uselessness in the sporting environment and ultimately give up on the whole pursuit of exercise altogether. The typical physical education environment contributes to why many youngsters in school come up with medical excuses to avoid PE class. Participants fail to have fun and focus on the quality of their experience if they are ranked as insignificant within the environment's hierarchical structure. Suppose people conclude that they can derive no value from sport or physical exercise because they have no hope of becoming successful or attaining a grand outcome. In

that case, they will doom themselves to a life of sedentariness. As Shane Murphy put in his book, *The Cheers and the Tears*, "As a vehicle for sponsoring mass participation in physical activity, youth sports programs are a huge failure."

Previously, sport provided a space for play and learning, and that in itself was enough to be intrinsically satisfying and fulfilling. However, with much of today's sporting culture, objective outcomes and results have become the be-all and end-all. They have eclipsed the subjective value of sport and play. In the same way as in other classes in school, where a high grade is the overall goal, with the desired outcome of leading to the money-making working life of adulthood. Rather than stimulating interest, wonder and curiosity in the act of learning itself. In an outcome-driven world, passion, curiosity, and wonder are often viewed as insignificant factors. Passion, joy and a sense of community cannot simply be measured, tracked, or analysed, and are therefore a waste of time. Yet, as Albert Einstein supposedly said, "Not everything that is measured matters and not everything that matters can be measured."

Many nations have poured overwhelming resources and taxpayer money into the elite end of sports. In contrast, Norway's state funding is focused on grassroots participation, particularly in local clubs and volunteer organisations, which provide most children with their first experience of sport. In Norway, organised sporting teams don't keep score until participants are 13, which means there are no targets or league tables. Coaches are forbidden from telling young athletes how much they weigh in case it induces eating disorders. Children are not pushed to specialise in a single sport too early. Norwegian Premier League footballer Erling Haaland grew up running, skiing and playing handball. Norway doesn't provide direct cash rewards to its Olympic medalists because it prioritises funding a strong grassroots sports system and promoting widespread participation and equal opportunities for everyone. They consider sport a public good, emphasising well-being over using it as a vehicle for capital accumulation and national pride through a commercial entertainment product. Once again, Scandinavia leads the way. On The Embodiment Coaching Podcast, Rafe Kelley asks the question:

> "Would you rather be a person who was a world record holder, who had done these incredible things, or would you rather be a person who had lived a practice that made you experience the world as more meaningful, more deep, more connected day to day? And that, fundamentally, I think, is the orientation that is appropriate for the vast majority of people and their practice, and it's something that is not really being taught and that most people don't understand."

Comparison is the thief of joy. That's not to say that some comparisons can't bring about positive change. When we measure ourselves against someone or something higher, we can orient ourselves toward improvement and surpass our current position. Many personality types find jaw-dropping feats inspiring. However, likely due to the prevailing mindset around sports, many are deterred from participating in an activity when they don't appear to meet a certain level of ability.

When we compare ourselves to others who are naturally more talented, to people who have been practising for a long time, or to some other arbitrary measure of skill, we can entirely undermine our chances of enjoying the process of improving day by day. Suppose we measure our self-worth in a specific sporting environment only by how our abilities compare to those of others rather than to ourselves. In that case, we can often doom ourselves to falling out of love with the experience itself and the personal progress it brings. Comparison can be a burden that veils your ability to appreciate your achievements and feel a sense of fulfilment. Valentine Dubois, in his competitive era, is a prime example of this. Any pride he may have experienced from his progress was squashed by wherever he landed on the leaderboard. The joy of the process was obscured by his self-destructive, goal-driven value system, which was based solely on his performance on a given day, compared to competitors whose abilities he could not control.

As a coach, I have witnessed many of my students become demotivated and ultimately drop out of class because they were comparing their own progress to others', despite my best efforts to

cultivate an environment of equality and a culture of effort in my classes. I have also seen this with experienced parkourists. It had ruined their whole training experience because they were comparing themselves to their friends. I've seen it sour, or even ruin friendships entirely. It can pollute the supportive and collaborative nature of training sessions with negative energy. Many individuals struggle to feel motivated unless they are the best among their peers at a training session. Not to say that this is indefinitely a fault of their own, as one's upbringing, or lack thereof, can lead to this mindset. It is a corrosive mentality because, as soon as someone better comes along, they can become resentful of the newcomer or even towards themselves, rather than being inspired and motivated by their abilities. It can often be dangerous when one-upmanship becomes the goal. Also, suppose the competitive-minded hotshot were to be injured for a period of time and had to be patient while rebuilding their strength and ability. In that case, when they are no longer the best at a training session, they can become demotivated altogether or rush their rehabilitation, which can push their ability back even further by aggravating the injury. Or even bailing and picking up a brand new acute injury.

We can maintain a healthier relationship with parkour when we view it as a personal pursuit, where our own progress serves as our guiding system. Everyone's body is unique, and people have different inclinations towards different aspects of parkour, so it really makes little sense to compare oneself to others. I highly encourage you to notice any traits of pathological comparison in yourself. If, when comparing yourself to someone else, you become frustrated, you are likely not considering and understanding the vast array of factors that have led to that person's current position, whether that was by hard work or an upper hand lent by luck of having parents with good genes. It is also a lack of understanding of your process and the circumstances that have shaped you into who you are.

This comparison mentality is prevalent in sport, which encourages people to believe they have no place stepping into something like parkour. You can imagine people thinking, "In the media, it's predominantly young, fit and boisterous males, therefore I have no place in it." However, when it comes to the growth,

development, and happiness of the individual, it's about expression, collaboration, building on what you can already do, and becoming more movement-literate, rather than reaching the level of the dramatic spectacle seen in the media. Again, it comes back to the effort and to what the experience, process, and community do for the person. It's all relative to the individual, rather than to standards held by elites that serve sedentary fans, consumers, and spectators. Do we want parkour classes at gyms to evolve into talent-scouting facilities that prioritise churning out competition winners, as in gymnastics and other sports? Or do we want classes that provide people with enjoyment, value, and a way to connect with their body, their environment and a supportive community?

When we prioritise framing parkour as intrinsically good for people, rather than placing excessive emphasis on objective outcomes, we can create supportive and collaborative communities that don't foster a culture of pathological comparison and conditional self-worth. We can all be more like Dom by giving unconditional support and applause to those who are pushing themselves. We can all strive to create a training environment where parkour is accessible to anyone willing to try it without fear of embarrassment or feeling unwelcome. We need to emphasise that everything people see in the media can be scaled down or regressed to any individual's current ability. Then they build on from there.

> "It seems that our perception of strength is often simply based on the idea of physical performance. But with a little thought, it becomes clear that when it comes to strength, what predominates is determination, courage and presence of mind and heart."
>
> -Vincent Thibault

Parkour Femenino

Female participation in parkour has historically been underrepresented compared to males. It has always undoubtedly been a male-dominated practice. I would be surprised if females made up more than ten per cent of all parkourists training today. Considering that women and girls make up half the world's population, it's important to ask why that may be. What factors prevent women and girls from thinking that parkour is something they could try?

For many people, the prevailing public image of parkour aligns more with long-standing, deeply entrenched societal gender norms for men, which may only reinforce the idea that parkour is a radical, masculine endeavour, unsuited to "delicate" girls and women. Which, of course, is bullshit. Believing that parkour is too hardy an activity for girls and women is not only an insult to girls and women everywhere, but it's a horrendous misunderstanding of the vast array of forms that parkour can take. When it comes to the more conventionally masculine sports, many hold the opinion that girls and women are far better suited to more delicate and graceful sports such as ballet, gymnastics, figure skating, aerial hoop, or pole dance, all the while being entirely oblivious to the fact that one must be tough as nails to excel in these activities. Parkour (as well as many other sports) is not an activity for any specific group of people, regardless of what physical and psychological attributes may be more naturally apparent on average between the sexes.

Society maintains some strange ideas that stifle girls and women in many important respects. The same goes for boys and men in many cases. Regardless of whatever more concrete differences there may be between the sexes, various traditional gender norms perpetuate an unrealistic behavioural binary that fails to account for the variety of personalities and behaviours that are often more accurately viewed on a spectrum. In other words, the conventional cultural notions of masculinity and femininity separate each gender and keep them neatly confined in their own polarised categories. In other-other words, people expect men to do manly things, and women to do womanly things. However, some things are simply human things.

Some parents will place far too much importance on ideals of masculinity and femininity and box their children's behaviours into this rigid binary. Girls are routinely conditioned out of wanting to play and explore in specific ways from a young age, whether that be digging in the mud, playing with bugs and snails, roughhousing, rolling down hills or climbing trees. Despite this perfectly natural gender neutral inclination for play, any girl who behaves in this way is strangely labelled a "tomboy", as if it's only boys who are supposed to engage in these innate, inquisitive, explorative and messy things. Many parents will enforce this binary of behaviour very early on, drawing an arbitrary line of what is and what isn't acceptable for a girl. All the while, they may be depriving them of the play and exploration that are crucial to their development, not just as girls, but as humans. Why are certain types of play only designated for boys? And how many of their so-called natural inclinations are instead products of nurture? It can be hard to grasp the full scope of effects this kind of early gender normative conditioning has on physical qualities, psychology and autonomy when leading into womanhood. However, they can undoubtedly shape ideas about which sports are best suited for girls and boys.

When I began training in 2006, there were very few women training, but the number has been steadily rising since then. Throughout the years, numerous organisations, initiatives, and video projects have promoted and normalised women in parkour. More and more women's events and jams are emerging around the world, with leading female parkourists and professionals serving as role models. All these efforts effectively demonstrate that it isn't just a testosterone-laden boys' club. You often hear our top female parkourists say they only got into the sport after seeing videos of other women doing it. Early on, Tadrina Hocking, Liv Rowlands, Luci Romberg, Aleksandra Shevchenko, Katie MacDonnell, Tamila Benabdallah, Lynn Jung, Alyssa Serpa, Shirley Rowat, Annty Marais, Fizz Hood, Pamela Forster, Kat Delatorre and Erica Madrid were all outliers in a space dominated by men, and being present in that space opened the door for many other women to try. The barrier to entry was undoubtedly higher for these women at the time. Yet they still

managed to hurdle it, and in doing so, lowered the barrier for future generations of women.

Nowadays, on the face of it, there is little difference in the ways that men and women train. The athletic progress of women in the sport serves as an invitation for others to follow suit. Lisa Schneider has said that, before seeing Hazal Nehir do big, scary cat passes, she was subconsciously under the impression that they weren't for women. Having an example of someone who looks more like you opens up the possibility for you to do the same. When Lilou Ruel jumped the Manpower gap in 2022, she paved the way for other women, and shortly after, Miranda Tibbling, Lola Roy, and Lena followed in her footsteps. (In this sense, if Mounia Moula was indeed the first woman to jump Manpower, it's a shame that it wasn't caught on camera, as it would have done a lot to reframe women's parkour and push the progression even sooner.) A style of parkour that is more high-impact, bold and "sendy" – which may have traditionally been categorised as more masculine – is being adopted by an increasing number of women everywhere. I've seen the Danish 15-year-old, Agnes Cecilie, working on a scary splat challenge alongside the mystical unc, Phil Doyle. Lisa Schneider and Hazal Nehir jump high-impact, high-consequence roof gaps that ninety per cent of male parkourists wouldn't dare try. Martita Gutierrez from Granada is not only bold, sendy, and has incredible control with flip precisions, but also exhibits a confounding level of explosive power and elasticity. She does snappy pop fronts off the concrete ground as if it were a trampoline. This growing trend continues to break down gender stereotypes within parkour and in the public eye.

At the same time, styles previously characterised as more feminine and less reliant on pure power, such as rail flow lines, have been adopted, built upon, and promoted more broadly by both men and women who are more expressive and more technically and artistically inclined. Far more men are moving in ways where brute strength and impact-taking aren't the primary themes. These intricate, fluid, and highly creative styles, which are becoming more prominent, shift the yardstick of proficiency away from playing to natural strengths more commonly seen in men. This has also helped diminish the perceived binary of masculine and feminine styles of movement.

The increasing diversity of styles among women in parkour, as well as among men, creates a less pronounced gender divide during training. At a session, you can now commonly see women and men collaborating on challenges, lines and ideas, sharing in each other's successes and learning from each other as equals, rather than a big cluster of boisterous men doing big jumps at one end of the spot and a couple of *damsels* on the sidelines practising rail flow lines.

Prominent athlete-artist hybrids like Camila Stefaniu, Lisa Eckert and Rachel Gough serve as inspirational figures not only for women training, but also for all parkourists. We should highlight this progress in our media to demonstrate that parkour is a space where everyone is welcome to contribute to the conversation and that there is no hierarchy of styles.

We can still do far better as a community in sharing and supporting the women of parkour, and in showing the world that what we do is genderless. But, this isn't all we can do. Hopefully, society's slow-moving progress continues in this positive direction. In the meantime, we as a community need to be aware of any behaviour that devalues, alienates, or deters women from participating. Beatriz Monge Ruiz, founder of *Parkour Femenino* in Costa Rica, told me:

> "There are currently about ten girls in the entire country who practice. Three years ago, I created this group [Parkour Feminino] with the purpose of increasing the population of women, since at that time I was the only woman who practised. At the same time, I wanted to create a safe space for women who practice, since, unfortunately, male chauvinism in Costa Rica and in the world continues to exist, and taking spaces for a single woman is dangerous. So many did not want to train with men to avoid situations of harassment, verbal attacks or humiliation. Currently, I am conducting a survey for women and men to identify other solutions to increase the female community presence, as well as to understand the problems that exist within our community, since many women still feel uncomfortable training with some men. Thus, creating a solution and

> unifying the parkour space in a pleasant space for everyone. A couple of days ago, the male athletes here who practice parkour attacked me with a video, messages and comments that said that my work was volatile stupidity, that my group was not necessary, that I wanted to divide the community."

It's disheartening that someone trying to create a better training environment for everyone is met with such hostility. It's important to realise that when people are highlighting common issues of foul masculine behaviour, it's not meant to be a divisive, *us-against-them* kind of attack. It's about promoting equality, inclusivity and improving things to benefit everyone. And often the only way to do that is by telling stories and using examples, and by explaining why it's not okay if we're aiming for an equal and fair society. Suppose you're a man who becomes uncomfortable and defensive in the face of this stuff being said. In that case, you're either insecure about your own shortcomings because the stories and examples being told reflect your own lousy behaviour, or you believe the patriarchal leanings of society are justified and deserved by some archaic and unfounded idea of male superiority.

As a woman at an event, class, session or jam, you're likely to be heavily outnumbered by men. There are undoubtedly many actions and behaviours that can make that environment feel uncomfortable and unwelcoming for women. Being a creep is one of them. Some men are under the impression that women's only purpose for attending a jam is to be swept off their feet by a strapping young, cart-fulling beta male. You see all too often a flock of hungry peacocking simps lurking around a girl who is just trying to train. If there is a lone woman at a jam, don't be the guy who lingers in her periphery, eagerly awaiting an opening to interject with some flimsy, unsolicited advice. It's funny how most parkourists show absolutely no interest in coaching, in any shape or form, until they see a girl at a jam trying to learn a front flip. Suddenly, some men turn into caring and altruistic super coaches. Believe it or not, most women don't want their value within a sport to be reduced to merely an object of adoration for the boys. There have even been instances where girls have had stalkers turn up to their parkour gyms. And some men

wonder why women-only jams and workshops even exist. It's largely because they provide a training environment where women don't have to put up with this crap.

Although they still don't protect women from cretinous troglodytes online. A post going viral and peaking outside of our bubble almost guarantees an onslaught of sexist and misogynistic abuse. To quote a few comments on an Instagram reel from Lynn Jung that randomly went viral, "That's dead. She barely did anything.", "Women can't do that lol", "this is so simple I could do this", "bois r better at parkore", "This is why women don't get paid the same to do things, it just not as good." "Is this a joke? This is easy", "Now ask her to park a car lol", "Why is the dishwasher jumping over fences?", "My down syndrome cousin can do better than that", "When u gotta get back to the kitchen in a hurry!"

Fortunately, these are comments from outside our community, though some within it can be just as condescending and toxic. Sometimes women want to upload their training content without receiving comments like, "OMG! MARRY ME!!! *six heart eyes emojis*" An anonymous female parkourists that Max Henry interviewed for his article, *6 Things Parkour Girls Wish Guys Would Stop Doing,* said, "Comments on parkour videos... Half of them are the 'good for a girl' type, and the rest are scattered with 'I would date that/tap that' or 'she could be my girlfriend', as if it were MY privilege. I just hate that most of the time, the comments are never about the movement in a non-condescending or sexually aggressive way. Not always, but most."

Of course, it's only natural that a sport involving jumping on walls like a ninja attracts some socially inept bedroom dwellers who are too afraid to speak to women in real life. Still, they make up for it by giving professional female parkourists unsolicited advice online behind the safety of their screen. Lisa Schneider had a male parkourist in her DMs who was of a far lower level than her. This person, someone she had never met or spoken to, would routinely reply to her story posts with terrible advice that verged on comedy. On a cat pass precision, he replied, "Try to push more with your arms like doing explosive push-ups."

Lisa replied, "Can't remember asking for advice."

The esteemed coach, whom she didn't know she so desperately needed, replied, "Yes."

On a running precision roof gap she was attempting to stick, he replied, "Try using your arms more."

Lisa said, "Try not giving me advice. If I use my arms more, I go even further, and that is definitely not the plan, so you're wrong."

The stranger seemed unperturbed by this remark and replied, "Jump less if you want to stick."

Lisa replied, "Wow, how have I not thought of that? Thank you so much for enlightening me…"

Lisa's mysterious online guardian angel replied, "Anytime *two thumbs up emojis*"

Over the next few days, the prestigious remote tutor replied to a climb up with simply, "Not bad." And to a running precision, encouraging her to, "Try to stick it *thumbs up emoji*" Both of which were ignored.

Whether this was an earnest attempt to help or to woo her with his gentlemanly goodwill and deep well of knowledge, the fact that he thought he could slide into the DMs of an experienced professional female athlete, who is undoubtedly far better than he is, is a bit of an insult. No matter how innocuous it may seem, idiots like this run rampant in women's DMs and comments, and these overconfident and patronising men wrongly assume an expertise gap purely because of their gender. Unsolicited advice can sometimes be genuine, though it often stems from a sense of male superiority, cloaked in low-effort kindness that is unapologetically self-serving.

A sense of male superiority, whether conscious or not, is buttressed in numerous ways. Parkour brands in the past have often used sexualised images of women in their marketing to sell clothing. In 2013, *Novel Ways Clothing* uploaded an image promoting their pink *Reach/Escape* T-shirt. The image was a bust shot of a blonde, with the face cut out, and the model is seductively pulling the shirt up to reveal some boob and a nipple between her fingers. The post received plenty of angry comments, such as, "I had really wanted a Reach/Escape T-shirt, but I'm not so interested in giving you my money if

this is your idea of my place in the PK community. Get your shit together."

And, "Why the fuck are you using this image on your shop? It's objectifying and dehumanising. Parkour is already suffering from massive gender inequality without shit like this."

In 2014, Team Farang stirred up controversy by posting a photo of a skinny blonde woman with her back to the camera, wearing their new raglan shirt and nothing else, except a thong. Bearing in mind, Farang were without a doubt the most followed and influential team and brand back then. And consider how many of their followers were young girls and boys. When parkour merchandise advertisement raises comments from the young community like, "TAKE YO PANTIES OFF!!!", "The fap memory is saved hahahah", and "I want to bang your ass" It's probably a good enough sign that things have gone awry. (And yes, those are real comments.) This was not a one-off for Farang either. Another post featured a skinny girl wearing nothing but underwear and a Farang snapback cap with an AK-47 scarcely covering her breasts. And again, the model was faceless with the cap's peak covering all but her lips. In 2015, apparently still not having learnt their lesson, Farang released a new lookbook photo series featuring the Farang guys doing flips on a roof as a half-dressed, skinny woman passively watches. The oldest trick in the marketing handbook very well may be "sex sells", but it is definitely an old trick that is best kept in the last century if we wish to see an increase in female participation.

You're mistaken if you think this is merely an issue of prudishness. I believe everyone should be free to post however much of their body as they want online without the Instagram police telling them that their body is explicit content. But in these cases, it's a group of lads leveraging attention for clothing sales with inactive, dehumanised, womanly shapes at the expense of the women of parkour who are already struggling for equal respect and legitimacy, not only in a male-dominated sport, but a male-dominated world.

It must surely feel weird for women in parkour to witness this, where non-practitioners are used as eye candy to sell clothes rather than athletes and active participants. Sexiness being the yardstick for women's value automatically puts them in a subordinate

societal position, regardless of how well they measure up athletically. It not only reinforces ideas of misogyny from men, but also reinforces young girls' ideas of where they stand in a male-dominated sport; objects of desire for the male gaze, rather than equals who carve their own self-worth through their creative ideas and the effort they put into their practice. We need more positive female role models. Not topless models being used by men to make a buck.

You can imagine it being pretty demotivating to try to increase female participation and achieve equality in parkour when some of the most respected and followed figures in our community are exacerbating the uphill battle. Objectification of women, sexism and misogyny are already widespread in society outside of parkour. What we can do without is when in December 2020, Pasha Petkuns posted himself doing a Gaet flip off the world-famous pornstar, Riley Reid's butt, before she pulls him down and proceeds to unzip his fly suggestively. It surprised many people that this post sparked a whirlwind of online melee. Pasha's defenders spawned in droves, all seeming to tout the same *sensitive snowflake* arguments, saying that they were just looking for something to be upset about. This is often the position held by blokes who are lucky enough not to have been on the receiving end of misogyny to understand why this sort of content coming from a sport's leading figurehead might be alienating, or far worse. The wanton reluctance to understand people's concerns was, in itself, upsetting. Some posted parodic reenactments of the post, taking the piss out of those speaking out against it. Pasha then shared them, gracefully dealing with the blowback... People were yammering about cancel culture, suggesting he was being targeted only because of his large following.

There was quite a bit of misunderstanding on the side which were defending Pasha. Those suggesting that it was irresponsible for someone with Pasha's influence (1.5 million followers at the time) should think twice before posting something like this weren't complaining out of pure prudishness. The cheap crudeness of the post was far from the problem. It wasn't a matter of being offended by it on a personal level. Whenever someone speaks out against something, it doesn't always mean they are offended—it's more likely that they don't think the ideas it generates or maintains belong in a

well-functioning community. It's not the content that's the problem; it's the context and the ideas that it proliferates about women's place in our sport.

It's always worth remembering that most people are fucking stupid. And you can probably imagine, a large proportion of Pasha's following are young, impressionable, and no doubt fucking stupid. Things like this only reinforce the idea that women's place in sport is as inactive sexualised ornaments for the male gaze (or in this case, pleasure a man orally), rather than being recognised as equals, whose effort and athleticism are of the same importance as everyone else's. Regressive representations of women in our culture can serve as another significant barrier to entry for girls and women.

No one was trying to cancel Pasha or call him a sexist. It wasn't like that. Everyone loves Pasha, which is precisely why everyone wanted him to do better in the future. The people in the comment section of the post weren't an angry mob with pitchforks revolting against a patriarchal tyrant king. They were simply saying, "Yo. We're not ok with this. Here's a couple of reasons why..." And that's how we should want our community to operate on these issues. When we call out regressive shit and engage in healthy discussions about it, things become clearer. We retune our perspective and move forward as a community, benefiting everyone. (As an aside, in a strange turn of events, Pasha and Riley Reid are now happily married and have a child together. Pasha lives in her $4.8 million mansion in Pasadena, California, and never needs to work again since his wife is such a *girl boss* breadwinner, which basically makes him a feminist icon...)

Discourse has also contributed to the normalisation of equal prize money and equal representation in competitions. Progress within competitions in this regard has been excruciatingly sluggish. In 2009, Luci Romberg became the first woman to compete alongside men for the same podium at a Red Bull Art of Motion event. By 2012, Art of Motion introduced a *Best Female* award, which Luci Romberg won out of a small handful of women. In 2013, SPL added a Women's Speed division to the North American Parkour Championships, which was the first dedicated women's division in a parkour competition. They

then introduced a women's style division in 2015; however, both were still with unequal prize money. APEX in Colorado upped the ante and held the APEX International with separate men's and women's podiums for Skill, Speed and Style, all with equal prize money. SPL added their first women's Skill division at NAPC in 2017, although it still had unequal prize money. In 2018, Air Wipp hosted separate divisions with equal prize money at the Air Wipp Challenge in Helsingborg, Sweden. In 2019, Art of Motion offered a full women's podium with equal prize money in Matera, Italy. In 2020, Tempest launched the TMPST Onlines, featuring separate men's and women's divisions with equal prize money for both, one of which received 77 submissions from women. And finally, after much consideration, arm-twisting, and threats of a boycott from prominent men's Speed athlete Davis Vasconcellos, SPL eventually came around and offered equal prize money across all its podiums.

The standard arguments heard from competition organisers who were reluctant to offer equal prize money were that the female talent pool was too small and that there weren't yet enough skilled women to provide close to the same entertainment spectacle as men. Many of them feel it is a risk for their business, doubling their costs to add another division without knowing if it would pay off. This argument perhaps held more water back in 2013, when SPL hosted the first women's Speed division, but not so much today.

In 2022, Red Bull sparked controversy in the lead-up to the Art of Motion Astypalea Edition by announcing it would invite twelve men and only three women. People had perhaps put a little too much faith in an energy drink company, whose primary goal is to sell cans of fizzy taurine soup. We had naively put them on a pedestal as the pinnacle of competitive parkour, despite the growing legitimacy of our grassroots events. Yet, they seem more concerned with putting on a show than with hosting a legitimate competition that offers equal representation and opportunities for both men and women. For them, Art of Motion is simply a marketing event. To many of us, it's long been seen as the grand zenith of competitive parkour.

Many raised concerns about the uneven gender split. Rachel Gough wrote, "Men literally complain about us getting views and say it's just because we're women, then say that it makes sense that Red

Bull wouldn't let more women compete cause it'll get them less views..."

Again, people spoke out only because they cared about the Art of Motion and its impact on our sport. Nobody truly believed there was any malice or overt sexism behind their decisions. However, Nico Martel of Red Bull Freerunning did not respond well to the outpour of criticism. Travis Verkaik wrote in a story post:

> "As much as I'm excited to take part in this new format, I'm very unclear why there aren't more female spots. As such an inclusive sport, this isn't a step forward in the right direction for competitions and allowing to showcase sick female athletes. Even though I will be competing, I want to make it clear that I do not support how there are only three female spots. Hopefully, there's a way to change this before we go to Greece. If not, they have to change this before I compete again."

Nico Martel demanded that the post be taken down; otherwise, he would be removed from the roster and lose the hefty sponsorship money that comes with it. Travis submitted. Having an uneven roster of invited athletes is one thing, but silencing those who criticise it is another.

Amid the communal outcry and debates, competitive veteran Lynn Jung wrote in a story post:

> "I used to believe that parkour (as a young subculture that has the amazing opportunity to learn from the mistakes traditional sports and other action sports have made in the past) has the potential to progressively overcome gender inequalities and create equal opportunities for everyone. I changed my mind. Too many men are involved in decision-making within the parkour community. Achieving equal opportunities for women is always a struggle, never the norm. If female athletes were included in decision-making processes, parkour would be better off in the long run. If you think

> women don't deserve spots at comps because they aren't as good as men and less interesting to watch, consider that depriving women equal opportunities now will only create a bigger gap in the future. There will be fewer women in the sport overall, and fewer will be training at a high level. I almost ended this with thanking any team, gym, organisation that creates equal opportunities for men and women, but really, it should just be the norm and doesn't even deserve extra praise."

Unequal prize money and a lack of media coverage create a self-perpetuating cycle. If women do not have an equal incentive structure to men and aren't valued as equals, you will see fewer women competing. Women are less likely to pay for a flight halfway across the world to Vancouver for far less prize money than men. Women are less likely to sacrifice more of their time to train for competition if women's divisions are continually considered an afterthought. As for representation, a lack of media coverage undoubtedly limits female participation in sports. When girls rarely see female athletes on TV, social media, news outlets, or cereal boxes, they have fewer visible role models to look up to. This makes it harder for girls to imagine themselves succeeding in sports or simply seeing themselves being welcomed in their environments. This is perpetuated across more of our media than you may think. The Parkourdotcom Instagram account, which presents itself as a community-backed official hub for parkour content (when in reality it's just another account that freeboots viral content and serves as a cheap facade for the morally bankrupt Adam Dunlap's Take Flight clothing brand), posts weekly community highlights that exclusively showcase men.

With competition, it's very much an "*if you build it, they will come*" situation, and that is precisely what we have seen since equal pay and representation have become more the norm. Since more competitions have introduced equal prize money, the number of women competing has increased. The skill level has also risen dramatically. At SPL3 in 2024, many of the Skill challenges set for women were too easy. The challenge setters underestimated the current level of the women competing. The level seems to be growing

exponentially. And more importantly, with this increased visibility across the board, more women and girls seem willing to try parkour.

Rather than just giving reasons why women are deterred from the sport, it's definitely worth asking why so many men and boys are attracted to it. In the ethnographical book *Parkour and the City*, Jeffrey Kidder says:

> "When researchers study male-dominated social worlds like parkour, it is common to question why more women do not participate in them. A frequent answer is that women are intentionally and unintentionally marginalised by male participants. Alternatively, Nancy McDonald reverses the question to inquire, not why women do not take part but why so many men do. What is it that men get out of their own participation? With parkour, we see that despite the many traceurs challenging the traditional masculine norms of sport cultures, training still serves as a manhood act. Women, of course, can and do train, and many train far more rigorously than men; however, in many respects, female traceurs are defying cultural stereotypes about women. Male traceurs, on the other hand, are living up to the cultural ideals of manhood. And for this reason, more young men are attracted to the discipline than women. Risk-taking affirms their identities in ways that it does not for young women."

For men, parkour and many "risk-taking" sports act as proving grounds of manhood; a space in which men can affirm to themselves and others that they align with the prevalent, partly socially constructed norms of masculinity. The women in parkour engaging in what's seen as the more conventionally masculine aspects of the sport are challenging the idea that it is only for men. This is one of many things that are slowly dampening the often arbitrary gender norms at a societal level. However, many who see these women in the media may still conclude that they have shed their femininity as a result, especially those who have grown up hearing the term "tomboy." Non-

practitioners may see women's clips and assume that parkour is for the kind of girls who dress in men's clothes, rarely wear makeup and feel more at home hanging around guys. But it may come as a surprise for some that femininity and doing things deemed more masculine aren't mutually exclusive.

Some of us in the community may poke fun at Noa Diorgina Man for being such a cliché hyper-feminine blonde chick. Her online presence, with her TikTok dances, fit checks, selfies, and shopping sprees, can make many of us cringe. However, she and others, being more conventionally feminine, while also being such skilled, hard-nut badasses, can challenge the public's beliefs that parkour is either for men or a specific type of woman, thus lowering what could be another barrier of entry to the sport for some girls. More people are likely to get into a sport when they see people like themselves represented. So long as the deeply entrenched, polarised gender norms are given weight in society, the more diversity of women training, the better.

As with many issues in this book, this extends beyond our little community's boundaries and is more of a societal issue. Many things cause people to categorise people, things and activities into the binary of masculine and feminine. However, across society as a whole, it appears that progress towards equality is slowly advancing as these constructs continue to be questioned and dismantled. Women shouldn't be exempt from the benefits of activities that build and affirm traits like physical and mental strength. Although they may still be widely deemed conventional masculine characteristics, they certainly benefit the lives of every human being.

When I originally wrote this sub-chapter in 2021, I finished with the hope that much of what I've written here would be outdated and irrelevant in the next few years. Five years on, I think we're undeniably well on our way to that point. Changing a small community amid the backdrop of patriarchy and societal gender norms, some of which have been in place for thousands of years, is a slow process. Meaningful discourse has moved the needle on equality, making more people aware of how to create and maintain a more inclusive atmosphere. We must continue to break down these barriers

and show that we're not an elitist and exclusive boys' club. We need more women in decision-making positions. We need to shine a light on the women who are pushing the sport, even if that means sharing them more in our Instagram stories. Include more action shots of women for jam posters and clothing advertisements. Instead of waiting for the next all-women's film, such as Queen City or Gatecrasher, normalise having women involved in every group video project.

Women-only jams, sessions, and workshops undoubtedly provide a better entry point for beginners than classes or open gym sessions filled with boys. As Melissa McQueen says in a Height Drop podcast, "If you're new to parkour, one of the scariest thing you can ever do is walk into an open gym session, because it's chaos, and it's usually a lot of guys and they're doing things you know you're never going to be able to do, and you're worried that you're going to get in their way, or get hit. I have watched girls walk into the gym, and just kind of stand and stare like a deer in headlights, and then retreat and not end up coming in."

Kira Nguyen says in the Women's Roundtable Storror podcast, "With the option of all-women's classes in every gym, you're going to have that confidence going into co-ed class."

They also give more experienced female parkourists a breather from pathetic attempts at flirting, guys hogging spots, and finishing challenges by tearing their shirts off and tensing their muscles, screaming, "LET'S FUCKING GO!" In the same podcast, Lynn Jung says, "Even today and yesterday, having more women around than usual changes dynamics."

Lisa Schneider responds, "It's so funny that we've all had the same thing, of like, we don't need this, and then we go to one [all women] jam, and it's like, oh, we do need this."

None of this is to say we would benefit from permanent gender segregation. In a Skochypstiks interview, Nikkie Zanevsky says:

> "When I first heard of girls' jams, I was against the idea. I thought it was self-segregation. I believed it was limiting the community's diversity. However, I changed my mind

as soon as I attended my first women's jam. I now firmly believe that such spaces are necessary for women in our discipline, as one option and a way to encourage one another. But above all, I believe women need to be seen training and teaching parkour in co-ed spaces, to help normalise different strengths and training styles. That's one of my main motivations for being a coach and for teaching co-ed classes."

If, like the men in Costa Rica, you consider women-only sessions as exclusionary, maybe consider how exclusionary the average parkour session can feel to some. Perhaps a better question than, "How do we get more women into our community?" Is, "How can we remove the barriers stopping women from joining our community?" The best starting point for dismantling these barriers will always be listening to the lived experiences of those facing them.

Post-peak PK (AKA Nap club)

Parkour is for everyone. And I mean everyone. So long as you're able to move to an extent and build upon your current movement capabilities, no matter how bite-sized the steps are, you can do parkour. With this in mind, the idea that you can only practice if you're young and fit falls apart. There is no cutoff point in age where you can no longer reap the rewards of becoming more autonomous in yourself and with your body in space. Or scare the shit out of yourself with some mental challenges. Many youngsters tend to view the ripe old age of 30 as a point of no return. The dreaded drop-off point. It's supposedly all downhill from there. Stuff stops working, and bits and bobs start falling off at random.

In many vigorous sporting professions, the retirement age is typically around 30 to 40 years old. Even younger in some sports. Recovery tends to slow down, warm-ups become longer, and it's harder to maintain explosive capabilities. Injuries accumulated throughout their career can leave a milieu of chinks in the armour and weaknesses throughout their kinetic chain. It takes more diligent

care and attention to keep themselves in top working order to progress, or even to maintain their current level. Even with the benefit of more experience, when you get to around that age in a lot of competitive dynamic sports, it can become nearly impossible to keep up with the young and spry whippersnappers who are naturally more agile and resilient. However, when comparing to other sports, it is essential to remember that most people who do parkour are not aiming to be world-class professional athletes.

Another significant reason why people above the average professional sporting retirement age might be deterred is, again, the comparison mindset, measuring up to the content they see in the media, ultimately concluding, "That ain't for me no more. Maybe if I were younger. I'd break me blimmin' neck if I'd give that a go now."

Yes, what some 20-year-olds are doing on Instagram might be unattainable for someone starting parkour in their mid-30s, but that's them and their journey. What's important is the progress the individual can make, along with the fun experiences and gruelling internal battles they can benefit from. All of parkour is scalable, and there are always ways to move forward from the current position. We shouldn't lose hope simply because we no longer meet the standards of an elite athlete. We shouldn't conclude that something isn't for us because we won't be able to make the podium in a competition anymore.

Many people fall into sedentary lifestyles after drawing this erroneous conclusion, and with sedentariness come its own problems. Sarcopenia, osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, back pain and less neural drive await those who don't give their body the movement it requires to function optimally. In perhaps more familiar terms: if you don't use it, you lose it.

Numerous studies have examined the decline in speed and explosive power with age; however, several criticisms have been raised regarding the methods used to study and interpret these declines. Most studies don't separate the effects of ageing from physical activity. Many older adults are far less active than younger participants, so the decline in power or speed could reflect disuse rather than ageing. Studies of master athletes show that much of the decline can be mitigated by lifelong training, suggesting that the

ageing effect is dramatically overestimated. The studies also fail to account for the multifactorial nature of explosive performance. By placing too much significance on muscle biopsy findings, they ignore changes in tendon stiffness, elasticity, range of motion, cartilage degeneration, balance, proprioception, and psychological factors. Newer studies show that older adults can significantly restore their rate of force development and explosive strength through progressive plyometric exercises and high-velocity resistance training, contradicting the idea that age-related changes are completely irreversible. We are *use it and keep it* organisms. As mentioned in Chapter 12, if we can listen attentively to our bodies and train accordingly, we can keep the train rolling for as long as possible. Perhaps doing parkour while adhering to basic load management principles is a recipe for optimal joint health.

The same applies to the mental game. Regarding the approach to tackling fear, there may be physiological and psychological differences between a teenager and someone in their 40s and beyond, as well as differences in experience and circumstances, which lead to a logically heightened sense of caution. Another factor for many is that when people are older and have kids, they're more commonly less inclined to take risks, as they will be less able to look after them if they're injured or dead. This is, of course, a significant shift in priorities, and one that is undoubtedly respectable. However, as long as the ageing parkourist remains consistent with training and exposure to fear, they can still improve their confidence and trust in their judgment. When we continue to ride the wave of our past mental battles and the memory of our technical ability in those experiences remains fresh in our minds, we should be able to maintain and build confidence for a long time to come. When it comes to finding joy in the experience, it largely depends on your outlook.

Many middle-aged parkourists around the world are brave enough to defy the imaginary limitations that society imposes upon them. Melissa McQueen (AKA Mel2Toes) is 51 years old and has been training for eleven years, ever since she initially took her kids to the APEX gym in Denver. The gym held stretching sessions for parents

who were too antsy to sit reading magazines in the lobby. Sure enough, these sessions acted as a gateway drug, and she was soon pulled into the classes. Despite having only two toes left after suffering frostbite during a mountaineering ordeal, she is now a regular staple of the Denver scene, also serving as the competition coordinator at USPK and a board member at Parkour Earth. When she's not being one of the most enthusiastic and playful people training during a session, she's embarrassing her SPL Skill champion daughter, Megan, by handing out gummy bears to everyone at the spot. Mel's posts regularly go viral on Instagram, and the dregs of society routinely haunt her comment sections with all kinds of diminishing pea-brained takes. Fortunately, of everyone I've ever met, Mel has the most impenetrable sense of self, and even the most vitriolic and spiteful negativity bounces off her like ping pong balls. Yet for every horrible comment, there are at least five expressing how inspired they feel, despite being older.

Also from Colorado, Howard Palmer, 45 years old, has been training since 2005 and is potentially one of the most consistent and dedicated yet underrated parkourists in the world. Instead of his performance taking a nosedive over the years, he appears to be still progressing.

Martin Clarke from Liverpool is 47 years old, and despite finding parkour in the last five years, he somehow seems to attend every single jam in Europe. As with Melissa, his passion, enthusiasm and willingness to throw himself headlong into novel challenges are infectious. At Storror's Big Wall Open in 2025, he became the oldest person to make the Sui wall run—and the oldest by a long shot, too.

Of course, I'd be remiss not to mention parkour's founders, many of whom are still going strong despite having submitted their bodies to over thirty years of training. Sébastien Foucan is 51 years old and is still as childlike in spirit as he was when I first saw him on my television screen in 2005. (And he's still just as shredded, too!) Yann Hnautra is the oldest of the bunch at 52. Although he may no longer do huge running arm jumps at height to his ribcage, he is still an unstoppable ball of energy who will out-quadrupedie anyone, anytime and anywhere. The youngest, Williams Belle, at 44, is still a force to be reckoned with and shows very little sign of slowing down.

He still appears able to perform all the same jumps in Évry as he did in his youth, including the Manpower gap, which he most recently jumped in 2024. In fact, not only once, but on three separate occasions. In an Instagram caption, he wrote, "I did Manpower more in my 40s than I did in my 20s *laughing emoji*"

Châu, Laurent, Yann, Williams and Sébastien are all still respected leaders and coaches in their local scenes. They lead by example, demonstrating that one is never too old to reap the many benefits of movement.

And then there's Thomas Fuchs (AKA Fantasthenics) from Leipzig, who is one of my favourite examples of old relics who won't stop for anyone. He's 57 and clearly gives no *Fuchs* about what people think. He's not exactly the best out there of his age group—Beau Kendall from London is 59 and is somehow still able to hit some big jumps and take some seriously high drops. But what I love about Fuchs is the unadulterated freedom in how he moves. Yes, he may run like Phoebe from *Friends,* and his technique and lines are kind of all over the place, but you can see he's out there every day, pushing himself and having a blast doing it, even though he's out solo much of the time.

Maybe more of us need to be more like Phoebe from *Friends*. She runs like a bat out of hell with a sonar malfunction and doesn't care about the opinions of strangers she passes that she will most likely never see again. She says to Rachel, "I'm more free. I run like I did when I was a kid, because it's the only way it's fun."

Many of us regularly shy away from trying new things out of fear of embarrassment, even though the better part of our community often views an attitude of openness and vulnerability as a virtue. Many are uptight and overextend themselves to maintain their diligently crafted cool external image. Not only might this be holding us back from tapping into our creative and technical potential, but it also prevents us from having as much fun as we would if we dropped these pretensions of manufactured self. Thomas Fuchs is free from the constraints of the expectations of others. He is free from the narrow confines of elite athleticism that is all too prevalent on social media, which warps expectations for many. He is on a journey, and doesn't seem overly concerned about where the destination is. He is

motivated regardless, and that's not only inspiring for other middle-aged and elderly people, but for all of us. We all should give less *Fuchs*.

What about even older? There's a higher risk of falling as a senior citizen, and a large number of these falls can prove fatal. Or, if not, it can irreversibly reduce their quality of life and set them up for a more miserable downward spiral to their demise. Doesn't doing parkour only increase this risk? Surely, when you get to a certain age, isn't parkour a bit too much? Only if you fail to appreciate how scalable parkour can be.

High-quality systematic reviews and meta-analyses find that exercise programs that emphasise balance and functional training reduce fall rates in community-dwelling older adults. The Cochrane review reported a 24% reduction in fall rate compared to an inactive control group.

In Alexandria, Virginia, Nancy Lorentz, aged 56, launched a parkour-based fitness and falls-prevention programme called PK Silver. They have had nearly 150 students aged 50 to 92. In a short Vice News piece, Nancy explains. "Yes, there is an element of risk in it, but you can't improve someone's balance by keeping them on the couch all the time."

It's fantastic that something widely perceived as extreme and highly injurious is being used to prevent injury and to create stronger, more graceful, and more dignified elderly people. PK Silver isn't alone in offering parkour sessions for senior citizens. Other notable organisations include Forever Young and Parkour Generations in the UK, as well as MOVE Academy in Singapore.

Yes, it may not look like your prime idea of parkour; they're moving slowly, steadily, and carefully over benches, logs, and low walls, and balancing across low and thick ledges. Of course, we have a general idea of what is generally accepted as parkour, along with its associated movements. Still, when scaled down to a person far less physically capable, it will undoubtedly look different. What we need to remember is that for them, it's an improvement that will be profoundly beneficial to their self-efficacy, independence, and, by extension, their lives. They will become reacquainted with deeper and

more varied squat and hinge patterns, regaining the essential ability to pick things up from the ground without pain or risk of falling. It enables them to learn what they are capable of and build on it. This opening knowledge of their body's capacity to move can rekindle confidence for daily tasks, making them freer and happier in their twilight years. As well as, of course, giving them something to fill their time with other than Sudoku, crossword puzzles, feeding ducks, being racist and homophobic, and waiting for their grandchildren to come and visit.

The old George Bernard Shaw quote is all too true: "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

We'll still need naps, though.

What about you youngsters? Many of us express our desire to continue training even when we're much older, saying we still want to be able to do backflips at 50. Will parkour still captivate you as much as it does now? Or will you cease to find fulfilment in it as soon as you aren't able to maintain steady progress in your preferred speciality? Will it still hold your attention when you are unable to receive the same attention and praise as in your youth? Will you still be able to pull value from the experience regardless of extrinsic motivators? Will you grow old in spirit as well as in body? Have you already somewhat grown old in spirit? Will I ever stop asking you vague and invasive questions?!

Still Able

What about those with disabilities? Very early on in the book, I mentioned Max Runham and Ruben Roldan. I met Max at the 2007 3Run Jam in London's South Bank. I very quickly noticed that this guy had one prosthetic arm. He was born without a left arm below the elbow. I just as quickly noticed that he could still cat pass way further than me, with essentially a rubber stick for an arm. He amazingly adapted his movement to accommodate his disability and became one of the most skilful and influential parkourists in the UK at that time.

And that's regardless of him having one arm or not. His jumping ability was among the best. He was able to do one-armed climb-ups and muscle-ups without the aid of his prosthesis. (You can see him doing two one-armed muscle-ups in a row at the end of his phenomenal 2009 video, *Project PS 4*. Followed by a cameo of me running into frame with his prosthesis between my legs, pretending it's my penis...) Although Max no longer trains, you can still find him writing and performing incredible music. He plays guitar, drums and piano and sings like a golden god!

At the age of nine, Ruben Roldan from Málaga suffered an accident at his country home involving a plough tractor, resulting in the loss of his left leg. The young Spaniard discovered parkour three years later and now puts together very powerful, technical lines that many two-legged parkourists would struggle with. His landing technique, as well as everything else, is so spectacularly polished that sometimes you forget you're watching someone with a single leg. This raises the question: with his evident talent, how incredible would he have been with two legs?

Frankfurt's Ihab Yassin (AKA Little Parkour Hulk) has dwarfism and has been enjoying training since 2011. Growing up, his parents were very protective and worried about him engaging in any kind of sport. They tried to direct him toward honing more book-heavy skills instead. In a Swapping Shoes podcast, he says, "They saw every time my disability and not my ability, and so that was kind of hard. They tried kinda to get me away from parkour, but I was just kind of stronger, I would say."

He's now undoubtedly a crucial face amongst the German parkour community. He seems to be at every jam in Germany, as well as cities further afield. Although he may be limited in many ways, his stature allows him to interact with spots in many unique ways. His undying energy, despite his parkour looking a bit different from everyone else's, acts as a wellspring of energy for those who come into contact with him, especially when he gets roped into dive rolling over progressively more people at a jam's afterparty.

In truth, everyone's movement looks different to one another. Each body and mind has different genetics and histories. Still, when

training with others, many of us can more easily see parallels in how they move and draw inspiration for our own practice. This is a big part of training and progressing with friends. With a disability, it can be challenging to train alongside others in such a way because their experience with obstacles differs so greatly. This can perhaps evoke a kind of movement solitude, which in itself is ultimately just another obstacle. Those who overcome this obstacle, with or without a disability, are immensely strong people. They can set aside comparisons to others and focus on their own experience and progress, still feeling a sense of ceaseless motivation. Although their bodies may differ, their will to adapt to their environment and to express themselves remains.

The modern industrial world is structured in a way that best accommodates the average person's ability to move and perform basic tasks. For as long as they have been living with their disability, they have already had to adapt to the environment every day outside of parkour. This no doubt takes a great deal of strength. Why should parkour be any different? We do what we can. We adapt. We grow.

Rooster & The Unsaleables

Cerebral palsy is a group of neurological disorders that affect a person's ability to move, maintain balance, and control posture. It's caused by abnormal brain development or damage to the brain before, during or shortly after childbirth. Common symptoms of cerebral palsy include poor coordination, muscle weakness, an unsteady gait, and difficulty performing rapid or fine motor skills. It can affect speech, swallowing, and cognitive ability, and it can also cause spasms that randomly contract the extremities, face, and tongue.

There's a 2013 video titled *"A Reason to Move (Cerebral Palsy - Parkour)"* that tells the story of a young James Blake Gallion (AKA Rooster) from Texas who lives with cerebral palsy. In the video, his mother says that at age three, he was given a walking frame to help him get around, but he hated using it. They told him he'd never walk without it, but he would toss it aside and try running about. He

would attempt to climb the stairs and do whatever he could. His unstoppable attitude scared the crap out of his mother, and she was terrified of him hurting himself so much that she stuck a helmet on him.

As he got older, he was rejected from various sports classes and clubs simply because people didn't want to take the risk or responsibility of dealing with him. When James came to his mum with a parkour video, she was understandably sceptical, but she didn't want to limit him if that was what he wanted to do. They headed to their closest parkour gym to try his first class, and they were welcomed at the door like James had been coming for ages already. Towards the end of the video, his coach, Jenin Gonzalez, tells the story:

> "That first day, his mom walked into the class to talk to me. She was upset about seeing him crash. She said to me, *'I'm tired of seeing him getting hurt and rejected. He saw this in a video and thought he would give it a try. But no matter where I take him, he's always cast aside. Gymnastics wouldn't take him, martial arts, soccer…'* I stopped her. I explained to her what I saw. *'Listen, your kid is trying twenty times harder than anyone to try and prove that he is normal, that he can do it. I believe he has the potential to get better; you just have to bring him back. I expect to see you guys next time.'* She smiled, sat back down, and watched. A month and a half later, the class was having trouble getting over a 5-foot wall. Rooster ran up to the wall and, with no hands, landed on top. With tears in her eyes, his mum looked over and said, *'Oh my god, that's my son.'* The next day, Rooster adds me on Facebook. He sees me online and says, *'Hey man, thank you.'* I reply, *'It's no problem, man. When you train hard, you get better.'* Rooster replies, *'No, not that. The first time I saw my mum come into class, I knew that meant it was time to go. This was the last time I was going to try something new. I was going to give up everything and just stay home on my computer. But as I was walking over, I heard what you said about me, and it reminded me that some people do care about me and believe that I can*

still be someone. So I never gave up, because I wanted to make you proud.'"

Despite doctors previously telling his mother he'd never walk without his walking frame, the video shows Rooster doing far more than walking. He's performing standing precisions, quadrupedal movements, jumping to a roll, assembling short lines with vaults and climbs, running with increasing pace on a treadmill, leg pressing at the gym, and finally, the video climaxes with him landing a front flip onto a crash mat.

His mother explains, "The progress has been phenomenal. From the first time he started to where he is today, he's a whole different kid."

Honestly, every time I watch this video, without fail, I become an absolute mess. I bawl my fucking eyes out! It's unfathomable for us to comprehend the amount of effort that went into Rooster's progress. For us, what he's doing objectively is nothing significant. But for him, to gain control of his motor functions and progress to the level he has, with a damaged cerebral cortex, is a colossal achievement that cannot be measured against any conventional and arbitrary perspective. Jenin Gonzalez and the other coaches didn't cast him aside upon realising he wouldn't make a worthy candidate for future commercial and competitive greatness, nor for success in a team. They knew that parkour could be a positive force in his life, helping him feel more at home in his body, his environment, and his community. Hats off to Jenin, Rooster's mother and, of course, Rooster.

> "If you break a toe, that's one thing. But if they have to amputate your arm tomorrow, how will you be strong? And if you lose your legs? What does it really mean to be strong? You know, sometimes you have to think about it."
>
> -Châu Belle Dinh

Parkour has long been depicted as a radical act, usually performed by courageous, athletic young men. It no doubt began as something radical, where people were making the city their own, untethered to

capitalism, as they didn't need anything to do it. It seemed to undermine systemic structures and the coercive urban planning designed to shuttle listless hordes of shoppers from one purchase to the next. Then, when parkour experienced its first mainstream boom, it became far less radical, even though it was fundamentally the same thing. Subversive street cultures, such as parkour, are inevitably destined for co-option by consumer capitalism. As Thomas Raymen wrote, "Nothing seems to sell better in hyper-regulated cities than an alleged critique of hyper-regulated cities." Consumer capitalism feasts on all that is emblematic of cultural liberalism and individualism to sell you things you feel you need to distinguish yourself from the herd. It heavily relies on our individualistic tendencies to continually update ourselves to align with whatever is edgy and nonconformist. Corporations cling tightly to any edginess associated with subcultures in a desperate effort to pretend their brands are cool, and consequently, they inadvertently drain the edginess from the subcultures they feed upon. Red Bull, Barclaycard, K-Swiss, Nike, Adidas, the list goes on. They convert all that is cool about parkour into slow-motion shots of back flips in front of the Eiffel Tower. And throughout the years, they have all sold a similar story. They prop up the saleable, able-bodied, athletic, and masculine individuals who have risen to the top, not only through hard work but also by virtue of the privilege of being born in the right body. It's a tale as old as time, and a marketable one at that. However, a story so played out and mainstream as this can hardly still be lauded as radical. Much of the parkour we see celebrated online or sought after by corporations constitutes hyper-conformity. Not only is there an abundance of representation of young, able-bodied masculine men in media that says so clearly that *this is for you*, but, as mentioned before, the risk-taking elements also create a space where men can live up to the stereotypical cultural ideals of manhood and affirm their masculine identities.

Perhaps the truly courageous and radical ones are those who do not see themselves represented in the media. The true radicals have overcome the prevailing societal norms that tell them this sport isn't for them or that they don't belong. It takes far more courage for a woman, an elderly person, a trans person, an overweight person or

someone living with a disability to enter a parkour class, or attend an outdoor training session, or jam, which at their worst can feel like a daunting and exclusive hotbed of toxic machismo. Those who are courageous enough to overcome and endure these barriers are the true radicals. These unsaleables deserve our utmost respect and encouragement, and their stories need to be told to outweigh the current exclusionary narrative.

Chapter 22 - Salience

Parkour has no clear end-goal. The parkourist defines their goals of practice, and there are many goals to choose from. And as soon as that goal is completed, it's never a dead end—many other goals then open up to you. It's what James Carse calls an *infinite game*. For many would-be parkourists, the issue is getting started.

Ambiguity

The ambiguity of what we do is another significant reason parkour remains inaccessible to the public, making it difficult for them to try or care about it. It's so broad, open, and free, which is a strength that you'd imagine would be appreciated by most. But this openness can just as easily be seen as haziness.

Maybe it's the sheer amount of freedom which makes it difficult to know where to start. When someone starts something like skateboarding, there are clearer milestones to muddle through. You learn how to skate along in a straight line, how to turn, how to stop, how to go down a shallow slope, manual, an ollie, then a kickflip, etc. Skateboarding remains a broad practice with numerous offshoots and areas of specialisation. Still, for a beginner, there seems to be a clearer and linear path to tread to accumulate the bare-bones fundamentals before it opens up, and then you have more freedom to create your own path and express yourself.

With parkour, the instrument you're learning to pilot is your own body. It is practically the most accessible sport you can imagine. Everyone has used it to some extent. Many sports require expensive equipment, specialised settings, or a specific number of participants. With parkour, you go outside and see what you can do. You might think this freedom would be a good thing for most, but the abundance of options and the lack of a straightforward linear process can be stifling more often than liberating. Instead of accepting one of

the many clear paths forward, they may blow off the entire endeavour. As the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, once wrote, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom."

Indoor bouldering is a booming industry which anyone can try. You pop into a bouldering gym and, without any instruction, you start clambering about and getting to grips with what you can do on the clearly colour-coded routes. Then, through trial and error, you learn more energy-efficient techniques and progressively gain more strength for harder grades. It has clear goals, linear, measurable progress, and very little ambiguity. You see people of all walks of life, of all ages and sizes, paying good money to pull on expensive pieces of plastic in a warehouse on an industrial estate. And these bouldering gyms are now all over the globe. And let's not forget where this accessible version of bouldering and rock climbing originally came from: climbing huge megalithic cliff faces. Practically one of the most inaccessible-looking pastimes one could undertake. It was pioneered by a counterculture of rope-savvy dirtbags on the very fringe of civilised society. The fact that it has been transformed into a weekend family activity on rainy days over a mere few generations is astonishing. However, it's also really cool, as many who start climbing in these gyms go on to seek adventures at outdoor crags.

Now, I believe that many of the things we value about parkour could be diluted if we were to follow suit and create accessible, colour-coded routes and challenges in parkour gyms. But who knows? Potentially, a lot can be gained. It's perhaps an idea worth experimenting with. It just so happens that a bouldering-and-parkour hybrid gym called FLASHH Barcelona has already built something like this. However, it's done in a way that's very similar to Ninja Warrior, except above a foam pit. And there are already more than enough Ninja Warrior gyms out there, as well as parkour gyms giving up space for various Ninja Warrior obstacles. There are undoubtedly some more creative ways to implement this to help get people through the door and cross the ambiguity threshold.

Obstacle course races, such as *Tough Mudder* and *Spartan Race*, are held worldwide and are extremely profitable. Every time you'll have hundreds of camel pack-wearing mud-o-philes get together, with

their GoPro chest mounts that accentuate their man-boobs. They run long distances, navigate a variety of tame, unimaginative, military-style obstacles, and, for some reason, get fully immersed in muddy swamp water. And somehow, this is generally more accepted and accessible than parkour. The clear goals and rules of other sports can make them more accessible, despite the need for specialised equipment and specific circumstances to participate. On the other hand, as a beginner, you can imagine showing up at a parkour gym or spot for the first time and not having the foggiest idea where to start. It's completely constraint-free compared to other sports.

Many people might assume they need prior knowledge of the named techniques and tricks to begin engaging with a space. As if just engaging with the space, without doing so in a specific way, is wrong. There are almost too many ways one can begin to build upon one's current low level of ability. It's simply about improving your movement. Everyone used to move around and play as a kid, and most people stopped, or it got transmuted into a weird adultified abstraction, like team sports or bodybuilding. Or too often, drop the entire pursuit of being physical altogether. In reality, starting parkour is like picking up where you left off as a kid and building from there. It can be as simple as letting curiosity guide you. Whenever an *'I wonder if I can'* comes up, try to answer the question with an action. It can be as simple as, "I wonder if I can get up there", "I wonder if I can jump this gap", "I wonder if I can still cartwheel", "I wonder if I can get from this side of the spot to the other without touching the ground", or "I wonder if I can balance across this bar." Once you answer these simple *'I wonder if'* questions, more and more *'I wonder if'* opportunities will start to open up to you exponentially, like an ever-growing web. Being around others and watching videos will continue to inspire more.

Not everyone can afford coaching or open-gym sessions as a starting point. Even if they can, many coaches can overwhelm students with a barrage of dos and don'ts, long-winded cues, and instructions. Coaches overextend themselves by providing overly analytical biomechanical technique explanations that primarily serve to justify their position as coaches, their expertise, and stroke their egos. Not only does this babying over-cueing enforce near-suffocating

standards for the right and wrong ways to practise, but it also undermines beginners' natural ability to figure things out for themselves. Many of us training today didn't come up through classes. We learnt by studying videos, training with others, and through rigorous trial and error. We learnt by answering *I wonder if* questions. None of this is to say that coaching isn't the safest and quickest way to learn; I believe it certainly is when the coach knows when to intervene and when to get out of their students' way, and merely gives direction and facilitates. I'm saying that if we reinforce the idea that there are no wrong answers and allow people space to look dumb, we can lower the barrier of entry by embracing parkour's ambiguity.

Accessible vs Cool

If we're interested in increasing participation, we ideally want to focus on two things simultaneously: broadcasting signals of accessibility and cultivating a culture people will want to associate with. The latter ultimately means we've got to make parkour look *cool*. Cool and accessibility have long been conflicting forces. One often seems to thwart the other's progress. For example, all the media involving rooftops and police, which, according to all the conservative purists, gives parkour a bad name. At the same time, for many people, it draws attention to parkour as something cool and countercultural—qualities that help propel the sport athletically and lend it legitimacy with the public. The standard level is no longer tiddling about on park benches. We're at the stage where people who would take the piss, shouting "hardcore parkour", see what's being done now and eat their words. But as mentioned, for many, these renegade and rebellious aspects may not do much more than dissuade people.

There have been many organisations on the other end of the spectrum, pushing for inclusivity and accessibility, attempting to show that parkour is for everyone. However, these campaigns are sadly rarely cool. Far from it, in fact. They mean well, and many show that parkour is for everyone, but they are off the mark in their attempts to pull in the widest net. They look lame in the media, making the job even harder for those trying to make parkour seem culturally cool.

And those on the other end of the spectrum make it harder for those trying to make it accessible. Those who perpetuate the idea that parkour is just *jumping off roofs* don't do much to help those fighting to have schools include parkour in their PE curricula. Surely there must be a middle ground.

Telling Stories

As I've said before, I was honestly a bit miffed when people began transitioning from the standard 3-5-minute training videos and action-reel bangers to longer vlogs. I resented how we at Storror also followed suit. I wanted to see the meat and potatoes of parkour, without sitting through people trying to document their way to training, talking about their daily routine, diet, and other superfluous personal bullshit I had no interest in. Early vlogs were shit—we can't deny it. Storror's too. When YouTube shifted to favour longer videos, and everyone jumped in line as obedient lapdogs of the algorithm, no one knew what the fuck they were doing. Many of us were hopelessly trying to fill the shoes of other non-parkour YouTube vloggers. It was painful talking to the camera. It was painful to watch others' vlogs as they attempted to speak to the camera. And the most painful was seeing people in person talking to the camera during a training session rather than engaging with their training partners. However, over time, many of us improved at creating more watchable vlogs. Now, for many groups and individuals, it has been whittled down into a formula featuring character, comedy, engaging story arcs, and, perhaps most importantly, salient relatability through storytelling.

How do these vlogs strike a balance between cool and accessible? Of course, for people to find it cool and actually watch, it's heavily dependent on what they're doing in the vlog; their charismatic personality is also on display, as is the skilful content. As for accessibility, these long-form videos often show the process behind these skilful and daring feats. Viewers can see all the nuanced features of how we prepare physically and mentally for challenges, break down moves into their parts, test our surfaces, what we're looking for when building a line, and find challenges or spots. It can

show the viewer how to properly deal with disgruntled, angry, and concerned members of the public, as well as police and security personnel. All the little etiquettes and niche values of our weird culture are being shared. All in all, good parkour vlogs that provide a window into our world can inadvertently serve as lessons that help people begin practising it themselves. Rather than just the 10-second final product spectacle on Instagram, viewers witnessing the process and the inner workings of the long preparation can feel more encouraged to test the waters themselves. With this knowledge, curious viewers can feel more confident about seeking out local groups or coaches to learn from.

Many story arcs in the past have been less about the movement and more centred on being kicked off spots by the police or a grumpy resident or office worker. However, the story arcs that I think people resonate with most involve overcoming a grand challenge. The highs and lows of emotion throughout the narrative show something very human and relatable. A great example of this is our 2021 video, *STORROR Parkour Water Challenge - Battling His Biggest Fear*. The video featured us at Sunbury Lock in Walton-on-Thames, jumping about 12-13ft to a wobbly, crusty, thin post sticking out of the dark, dingy water of the River Thames. After everyone else eventually managed to stick the jump, only Josh was left. Except that Josh has never been overly fond of water. He'd completed many water challenges in the past, but this jump had far more uncertainty surrounding it. The likelihood of any of us sticking it the first time was unknown and a bit of a gamble. In the video, Toby explains, "It's not that long ago that he overcame his fear of swimming in general. We've been on trips, and he hasn't even been in swimming pools and stuff. So the fact that he wants this is so sick. There's so much more to this for Josh, cos he's just got a lifetime of the fear of water to deal with."

It wasn't as simple as chucking it and seeing what happens for Josh. Because no matter how he could rationalise the jump itself, the irrational, deeply ingrained fear, etched into his subconscious by the uncertainty of the soupy, opaque water would prevail over his rational mind, causing him to stay put on the edge. There were layers to this

mental challenge; one layer he could rationalise with his fifteen years of experience, and another, deeper layer that was impenetrable to logic.

It took an hour of collective effort to support Josh with the decision, as we tried to reassure and rule out any possibilities of danger. He finally committed to the huge standing precision, undershot, and bounced off backwards, then squirmed out a cat-like 360 spin to change his axis mid-air so that he could land feet-first into the water. Of course, he resurfaces completely fine and makes a rushed, short swim to the concrete ledge around the corner. And as you can imagine, the rest of us are going fucking haywire for our friend who has just broken this unimaginable mental block. It must have been a shock for anyone passing by the serenely quiet lock on the river to be suddenly blasted with a cacophony of ecstatic blokes screaming. Despite him technically failing the jump, the veil had been lifted, and the fear had been broken. This, in and of itself, was a massive success. We offered up our dry shoes for him to try again, and on the second attempt, he stayed on the post before doing the arm jump back with no hesitation.

In the video's comments section, many viewers expressed how emotional the moment was for them. The internet is more often than not a cesspool of hatred, sociopathic trolling, and spiteful Karens who revel in being enraged by everything. Still, I have honestly never seen such a genuinely sincere and wholesome comment section like the one in this video: "I'm a grown man, and I'm over here in California with tears in my eyes when Josh landed that second one… I hate you, Storror!!!"

Another commented, "Legit made me break emotionally seeing Josh commit to the jump, overcoming a fear. I've been really struggling with some mental stuff lately, and that gave me the boost I needed to face my own fears. Seriously, you made my year, Josh. Thank you."

Another wrote, "Something about watching Josh overcome the mental battles internally was something else. Having battled through depression and anxiety this year, I felt such an overwhelming feeling of empowerment and love watching Josh come through."

A surprising number of commenters reported squeezing out a tear or two from Josh's commitment and all our encouragement. It's a 38-minute video centred on a single jump, and viewers absolutely loved it.

"Josh's part really got me emotional. All the positivity you guys gave off was so heartwarming. And god, I'd love to do that kind of parkour!"

These emotional story arcs in videos offer a glimpse into the pinnacle moments of the parkour experience and endeavour. These moments occur in every training session, to varying degrees. These moments are often profound experiences of revelation, where the person who lands the jump is not the same person who took off; they have changed and improved in some way. This, in my opinion, is where the parkour content creator's job is so important. This style of inadvertent parkour advocacy through story telling is something our media would do well to hone in on. And I'm obviously not saying that you need to make shit that's going to make grown men from California weep. I simply mean to tell good stories in our videos. I encourage parkour content creators to put a spotlight on everything that makes parkour such a significantly meaningful and worthwhile part of our lives.

The crescendo leading up to the elation after completing the challenge can resonate deeply with viewers. This is one reason why fiction is so powerful. It speaks to the human experience in a salient way. All the recent climbing documentaries that have gained mainstream attention centre on a character or a group of characters facing a seemingly insurmountable challenge of their own choosing, and follow their transformative journeys to overcome it. This same *hero's journey* landscape is prevalent across all storytelling, dating back to the beginning of storytelling.

We can guess that most Storror viewers don't practice parkour. Often, raw back-to-back movement clips in vlog-style videos aren't enough to keep normies engaged. There have been enough times when this has been reflected in the views of our videos. We know that many non-practitioners nod off when they struggle to grasp the technical aspects of the movement they're watching in videos. Even my dad told me he

sometimes skips through the movement sections. (The bastard!) Not only do very human and relatable story arcs make content more watchable, but, more importantly, they can also show someone why they should give a shit about parkour. They can give hints about what they could gain from participating. Ten years ago, I would never have thought I'd be such a big proponent of vlog-style content in this way. They don't have to be vlogs either; there are plenty of video pieces and docs that serve the same purpose. Documentaries, such as those of *Point A Parkour*, fill a crucial space in the parkour media ecosystem. This media, when executed well, can show people that parkour is a worthwhile pursuit because something so inherently crucial to feeling human can be drawn from the struggle and the sweat, the danger and the risk. The viewer seeking a real and meaningful experience can see that parkour can provide it by the boatload.

2 kewl 4 skool

In Max Henry's 2018 article for *Parkour Entrepreneur*, titled *Has Parkour Peaked? A Google Trends Analysis,* he analysed global search trends (from 2004 to 2018, and found that for the most part, parkour's popularity has plateaued. Most of us certainly wouldn't have guessed so, judging from all the new gyms, clothing brands, and different events popping up worldwide. However, one thing that appears to be consistently rising over time is the number of searches for "parkour gyms", "parkour for kids", and "kids parkour".

This suggests we have made progress in normalising parkour and making it more accessible and inclusive. We've somehow managed to transform what was once perceived as one of the most extreme new sports of the 21st century into something 'family-friendly', all in little more than a decade. In his closing paragraph, Max says:

> "Looking at these trends, it seems likely to me that this generation will not produce parkour's Tony Hawk or Alex Honnold. Though some of us may make it as athletes, most

will remain the gym owners, coaches, and business leaders paving the way. If we're smart, the work we have done to normalise parkour for the next generation will result in a world where future practitioners *do* have the ability to make a decent, consistent living wage doing what they love."

In several countries, parkour is being incorporated into physical education curricula. John 'Hedge' Hall, from Edinburgh, has expressed in the past his hope that one day parkour will become so boringly normal that it's just another sport kids practice in PE at school. Likewise, Tom Coppola in Vancouver has said how he would like it to be completely normal to hear that a kid is doing parkour as an after-school class. Imagine people's general reaction to hearing this not being one like, "You're not letting your kid do that building jumping malarkey, are you?! Do you want them to fall off a roof and become a paraplegic?!"

If, after everything else in the last two chapters, you're still left with the feeling of, "That's lame as hell! That's not what I want parkour to be! It should remain niche, rebellious and counterculture." I say, well, tough shit, mate! It is not only yours, and it's not only up to you where it can go and what it can be. It is a movement practice so broad that it can't be constrained to any gatekeeper's confined and rigid idea of what ought to be. Suppose you want to do rooftop stuff, cool, good for you. That applies to those who want to see it in schools as well. Cool, good for you. It can manifest itself in gnarly roof gaps. It can manifest in children practising vaults and flips in a fun, controlled environment, such as a school gymnasium. They are but two heads of the same beast, of which neither would we gain from decapitating.

This gatekeeping may be a product of viewing parkour through the eyes of not only a practitioner but also a consumer. A consumer of media content that you would prefer to see. When scrolling, we are inclined to restrict our feed to those who are doing the best and most entertaining stuff, in short, concise, tightly cut videos. This consumer mindset is why many of us disregard, or even scoff at, middle-aged parkourists like Thomas Fuchs, as well as women and others who aren't as objectively elite as the parkourists

we follow. I, too, am guilty of this to some extent—I am a consumer too. I have preferences for the parkour content I see. My feed is predominantly quick fixes from the best in the game, not necessarily always respecting content more associated with the *culture of effort*. However, I also sincerely want as many people as possible to experience all that parkour has to offer. We need to be aware of how platforms like Instagram and TikTok foster a lack of patience and understanding for anything outside the most elite. We need to be aware that these quick-fix online spaces can spill over into the real world, distorting our perception of others and their genuine efforts to create and improve. It would be a shame if we didn't give little Billie the kudos he deserved for overcoming his fear and doing his first kong over a wall. It would be a shame if most of us were completely uninterested in engaging with anyone who showed an interest in trying parkour.

Parkour is broad enough to accommodate both the culturally cool and accessible aspects. As with Tom Coppola's ideal world, where kids' parkour classes are seen as fairly unremarkable and non-provocative, I hope that one day it will be pretty ordinary and ubiquitous to see people on rooftops preparing to undertake a "death-defying" mental challenge. Perhaps, instead of yelling or calling the police, members of the public will trust that these parkourists have sound judgment and decision-making skills and won't have to fear that they'll splat on the pavement in front of them. I hope that in the future, it will be entirely unremarkable to see a group of middle-aged or elderly friends training at spots or in the park, without passers-by muttering under their breath how they're mutton-dressed-as-lamb, eccentric old fossils. I hope that it will be completely commonplace to see a whole family doing parkour wherever you are. And they are all simply viewed as people moving with obstacles to develop themselves.

When we have eventually promoted an understanding of the prevailing deeper mindset and intention, there will be an acceptance of parkour as something of great value. I believe we can get there. We just need to keep telling stories.

At the Core of it All

At this point, it should be explicitly obvious that throughout this book, there have been two opposing themes: the value of the outcome and the value of the experience. I've noticed that these themes are deeply embedded in most of our community's disagreements. Through our decisions and actions, we, as a community, collectively decide where our community's values will lie on the spectrum between these two poles: goal vs. process, destination vs. journey, effect vs. affect, extrinsic vs. intrinsic, spectacle vs. effort, and the outcome vs. what achieving that outcome requires of us. In our actions, we choose whether we value what we do or what it does to us—how it changes us for the better. We're deciding whether we care about what an individual does or the individual.

There's no real way of knowing where things will end up if we lean too heavily toward either side of the spectrum. But as with many things, a good middle ground is sturdy ground. We just need to be cognisant of how some middle grounds can quickly turn into steepening slippery slopes. Perhaps the best way to get a decent gauge is to recognise how this spectrum manifests in ourselves as individuals and to notice each side's merits and pitfalls. When left unchecked, will some of the things we do pollute the process and a healthy relationship with ourselves and parkour? Our personal *why* must serve as our scaffolding and our compass. Parkour is now being co-created by us all, and we, as a fragmented community – ideologically, culturally and geographically – are collectively shaping where it goes. We are all active stewards of the sport.

Chapter 23 - In closing: It's Nothing

> *Modern life doesn't give you many chances of seeing what you're capable of—to see where your limits are.*
> -Chris Keighley

Figma Morphogenesis

In the opening chapter of Katy Bowman's book, *Grow Wild*, she speaks about how trees grown in the controlled and hyper-sterile environment of greenhouses usually die when transferred and rerooted outside. A tree's genetics will control its species and certain things like its bark and leaves, but in terms of its individual shape – how it grows with the direction of its branches and roots – they are more formed by their environment. That includes access to sunlight and nutrients that all plant life competes for. Furthermore, trees grow in response to environmental stress. Their shape must allow them to succeed, given the physical forces they must withstand. Trees must be strong enough to withstand battering winds, heavy snowfall in some regions, and various creatures. For example, the way their roots grow adapts to the wind forces they experience, anchoring them more firmly to the ground. Trees possess these features to some extent due to their genetic makeup. Still, the specific ways they adapt are largely determined by the various physical loads they experience in their respective environments. This is called Figma morphogenesis. So when these mollycoddled trees, grown in a controlled environment, are transplanted to the wild outdoors, they are unprepared and fragile to the demands of the environment, and the wind and other environmental factors ultimately destroy them.

So, you may be wondering why I'm reading a book about trees. You're more likely wondering why the fuck I'm telling *you* about it in the final chapter of a book about parkour. It just so happens that Katy Bowman's book, *Grow Wild*, is actually about people.

Modernity is our greenhouse. We live in a unique time with unique problems. We live in an age of convenience that has brought us many comforts, which not only make us move less but also expend less effort in all aspects. We've created technologies that automate many jobs and tasks, removing the burden of physical labour and reducing most physically demanding jobs to sedentary office work. A large portion of society now makes a living sitting down for extended periods. Even outside of work, we cognitively offload to GPS and other technologies, which, despite making life easier, dull our ability to do certain tasks ourselves.

Cognitively, ChatGPT and other large language models are eroding our capacity for abstract reasoning and critical thinking. As for community, social media has connected us all, yet we are experiencing an unprecedented loneliness epidemic. The in-person neutral grounds of third spaces, such as cafes, parks, pubs, gyms and community centres, have been relegated to cyberspaces, where we become algorithmically cocooned in increasingly politically polarised echo-chamber hug boxes. Smokescreen communities of group chats are replacing face-to-face meet-ups, and the most enriching forms of social exchange have been watered down to people leaving heart emojis on a meme you sent. Gen Z are wrought with asphyxiating anxiety and depression, with a low tolerance of uncertainty and is thus trapped in perpetual adolescence. Gen Alpha, who have practically had smartphones surgically sewn to their hands since birth, are likely to be even worse off in the future.

We are being hacked; the vulnerabilities of our psychology are progressively weaponised, with our attentions becoming a product for billion-dollar tech companies to sell to advertisers, compelling us to spend more and more waking hours transfixed by screens. The expression "if you're bored, you're boring" holds less water since smartphones have killed boredom. The average person now has the attention span of a walnut, and I'm sure that most of you would be doomscrolling while reading this book, given the option. Our consciousness drifts mindlessly in cyberspace, lethargically suckling at the teat of unending dopaminergic treats, all the while the meat sacks we once operated sit in kyphotic placidity. Humanity is slipping into

an exponential decline into mass sedentariness, atrophy, psychological fragility, risk aversion, and loneliness.

Nowhere in our evolutionary timeline has our species collectively moved so little as now. Truth be told, it was all downhill since the advent of agriculture around 10,000 BCE, when, instead of being egalitarian wandering hunter-gatherer nomads, we plonked ourselves down, settled in one place to grow food and create permanent shelters. Sure, Neolithic farming was hard – the spinal deformities in the fossil records further confirm this – but we can be sure that the Neolithic revolution was the first link in the chain of events that led to the exponential technological innovations which made personal locomotion and physical labour increasingly optional.

According to data from the Global Health Observatory, insufficient physical activity is the fourth leading risk factor for mortality. Approximately 3.2 million deaths each year are attributable to insufficient levels of physical activity. As well as 32.1 million DALYs (Disability-Adjusted Life Year – a measure of health burden, including both reduction in life expectancy and diminished quality of life). People who are insufficiently physically active have a 20 to 30% increased risk of all-cause mortality compared to those who engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity most days of the week. According to the World Health Organisation, worldwide obesity rates have nearly tripled since 1975. In 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults, 18 years and older, were overweight. Of these, over 650 million were obese. Over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 were overweight or obese in 2016. (That is the same as the population of the United States. But, let's be honest, they are undoubtedly a key contributor to that figure.) In 2022, the number of adults with obesity worldwide rose to 890 million, with 2.5 billion being overweight.

There has never been more evidence correlating a sedentary lifestyle with disease, pain and mental illness than today. A major meta-analysis published in JAMA Network Open (2019) found that high sedentary behaviour significantly increases the risk of developing depression. A 2020 meta-analysis in BMC Public Health found that higher sedentary time was associated with greater risks of developing

anxiety symptoms, with screen-based sedentary behaviours (especially excessive social media use) having stronger associations. The link between a sedentary lifestyle and chronic pain is one of the strongest and most well-established relationships in health research. Large longitudinal studies show that higher sedentary time increased risk of chronic low back pain, neck pain, fibromyalgia, and widespread musculoskeletal pain.

The World Health Organisation's data shows that, in 2022, 31.3% – roughly 1.8 billion people – did not meet the recommended weekly physical activity guidelines. This is up from 23.4% in 2000 and rose 5% between 2010 and 2022. Higher-income and more developed regions tend to have higher inactivity rates, which is odd, as one might expect a higher income to lead to easier access to sports. In the US, only 46.3% of adults met the guidelines.

As much as I'm sorry to blast you with stats, they are no doubt alarming. In the scope of our evolutionary timeline, this emergence of inactivity is astoundingly abrupt. It has all happened so fast, and it continues to grow. This biological aberration, brought about by culture and technological advancements, is like the blink of an eye compared to the gradual accumulation of mutations that led us from arboreal primates to big-brained bipeds. This is, as the English rapper Jehst puts it in his song, *Good Robot*, "evolution at a tangent." Throughout modern society, we are witnessing what can be described as a pathological species-wide disembodiment. Not only does moving less increase various co-morbidities, but it also cuts us off from our most vital sources of optimal experience, connectedness, and learning.

Childlike

I have always found it funny when pretentious people claim we should adopt a mentality more akin to that of a child. "We all need to be more childlike." It makes me question whether they have met children before. Infants on planes, in supermarkets, or in cafes kick and scream until they get what they want. And what they tend to want these days is an iPad in a bombproof Minions case, that they

then launch when they inevitably become enraged about some other minor inconvenience. If an adult behaved like this, you'd instantly conclude they were an unbearable and ill-tempered arsehole! Children haven't yet developed any capacity for empathy, shame, embarrassment, or anything else that constitutes self-awareness in relation to others. And to top it off, they piss and shit their pants and have their parents deal with it. They are literally crap humans that haven't yet developed enough not to shit themselves. So you have to assume these pretentious people are probably talking about how they learn in the early stages of their development.

Children and infants are notoriously neuroplastic, meaning that it's easier for external stimuli to make changes to the structure and function of their brains. Adults can attain similar levels of neuroplasticity when the stimulus is sufficiently important and relevant, but for children and infants, everything is important and relevant. Everything is new to them and therefore significant and interesting. They are making sense of their strange new world wherever they go. They are sponges, absorbing as much sensory data as possible. This creates curiosity and inquisitiveness, which is fascinating and funny to watch in children, because you get to vicariously live the process of figuring out and breaking down simple, mundane things. For them, each novel experience is magical and engaging, which, if you're at all empathetic, makes them magical to be around. (When they aren't screaming and shitting themselves, of course.) There is something to gain from making sense of everything. Curiosity and the will to learn are built into all of us. In a *Movers Mindset* podcast, Flynn Disney defines curiosity as "a positive sense of uncertainty."

Children's lives are almost entirely led by *'I wonder if'* thoughts. They are a prevalent motive behind a majority of their actions. A lot of which takes the form of play. Kids are naturally inquisitive. Then, somehow along the line, our parents and the school system manage to beat that out of us. (Figuratively, unless you grew up in an era when corporal punishment was still the go-to.) Today, many children's natural inclinations to play and explore are largely satiated with screens. Screens are also used to console and pacify

children who are having a tantrum or just being energetic and naughty (playful), as normal kids often are.

While schools try to teach children, they somehow make them hate learning. Learning is framed as something one toils through for an outcome rather than as intrinsically valuable. They're motivated to focus on getting good grades rather than being inspired to find wonder in what they're learning. Any children with energy and curiosity indirectly linked to the content of their mind-numbingly boring classes are swiftly slapped with a diagnosis of ADHD and promptly medicated with Adderall or Ritalin. As leading play researcher Peter Gray says, "We've turned childhood into a time of resume building."

We are told that what we learn is unequivocally congruent with future success in society. As we get older, we continue to dissect more of the once exciting, mundane stuff. We work out and whittle down all that's most relevant and useful to us into a narrow scope, typically focusing on whatever leads to a future with good grades or income. With this narrowing scope, the learning curve plateaus, and our curiosity tends to stagnate. This narrowing of our field of vision of what's relevant results in seeing fewer opportunities for learning and growth through novel experience. We grow up, set ourselves on a single path, and specialise, thus putting a roadblock on many opportunities that could bring us value. The *'I wonder if'* thoughts are turned down and eventually extinguished altogether. In doing so, we insulate ourselves from a broader range of novelty, risk and adversity. Unstructured play and whimsical curiosity for their own sake become a frivolous nuisance and a big waste of time. Anything that is incongruent with their societally imposed narrow scope of value is simply scoffed at and deemed *a pointless skill.*

Play & The Birth of Exercise

Play is crucial to a child's development. There's a towering body of scientific research suggesting children do not develop properly unless they play. It's also true for non-human animals. A neuroscientist named Jaak Panksepp discovered that when juvenile rats are deprived

of the opportunity to engage in rough-and-tumble play, their prefrontal cortex doesn't develop properly, leading to increased aggression, anxiety, social deficits, and impulsive and restless behaviour. Panksepp's work revealed that the drive to play is hardwired in the brain, arising from subcortical regions—meaning it's biologically rooted, not merely cultural or cognitive. It's not learned, it's instinctual. (He also discovered that rats laugh, which is pretty cute.) Stuart Brown, founder of The Institute for Play, has collected thousands of individual play histories and discovered that play-deprived individuals are more likely to become paranoid, violent and extremist. Not only that, but play-deprived individuals are likely to be less tolerant of stress, and consequently, will tend to develop more health problems than their playful counterparts. In this sense, play-deprivation is also a public health issue.

Play is, in fact, an evolutionary norm; young animals are hardwired to enjoy it as a way to learn about the demands that will be present in their environment. It's a natural behaviour to help animals solve complex problems in the face of uncertainty. Animals have instincts encoded in their genes, but a wide variety of motor skills, physical qualities, social rules, and emotional responses must still be honed to meet the environmental and social challenges of adulthood. The same goes for language: our genes provide the foundation for learning it in early childhood, but it's only through exposure that we can learn it. Animals playing is essentially practice for being an animal. Those who don't play will be less prepared for independence in the wild. This doesn't mean it's conscientious preparation for adulthood; it's simply an unconscious, enjoyable behaviour that has been passed down genetically for millions of years because it increases the likelihood of survival. And yes, millions of years. Some experts speculate that even the dinosaurs may have benefitted from the practical advantages of play. Still, scientists are pretty sure that early mammals, especially primates, were playing sixty to seventy million years ago. (Still, I can't help but imagine velociraptors playing spike ball. Perhaps palaeontologists are yet to uncover the remains of a stegosaurus with a badminton racket.)

When wild animals get older, they generally play less because they need to conserve their finite energy resources for hunting and

gathering for themselves, as well as contributing calories to their tribe, pride, pack, herd, school, troop, mischief, murder or gaggle. But when there is abundance, safety and comfort, adults are more likely to join in with the tomfoolery. We can think of play as 'animal school', where if you graduate, you're more likely to survive and be a cohesive member of the group. And if you don't graduate, you're more likely to die from predation or starvation.

Being a human is now pretty chill compared to the harsh world of wild animals. Modern society conveniently makes it so that most of us have the whole predation and starvation thing relatively under control. It's only the last few hundred years that we've managed to eliminate the threat of predators from our daily lives. And we've done a very good job of delegating the hunting, gathering and farming to giant corporations with their mass-production factory farms. There is a very low metabolic cost for going through a McDonald's drive-thru and scoffing thirty chicken nuggets in the car park. With a bulk of our species now earning money for food and shelter whilst sitting down, we don't really have to worry about moving all that much. So, we learn through play up to a certain age, then we reach a point where we no longer need the movement we developed through play in our youth. And as with wild animals in adulthood, we stop playing to conserve our energy for the strenuous labour of being a breadwinner. (And unlike wild animals, we don't have an abundance of time outside of being a breadwinner.) Except we don't need to move to "win bread", so we don't expend many calories. So an alarmingly increasing number of us become withered and unfit, overweight and obese and must deal with all the associated maladies.

Then comes the invention of exercise. And yes, exercise was invented. It's a uniquely human thing. Did you ever hear of an animal in the wild doing reps and sets of something? Their "exercise" is the demands of being a wild animal. No creature has reps and sets etched into its DNA. The Hadza tribe of Tanzania is one of the few remaining hunter-gatherer tribes, said to live more in line with how our ancient, pre-agricultural ancestors lived than any other tribe today. They too don't exercise and would be baffled by the concept. They don't even have a word for it. Yet their life demands that they move far more

than the average modern Westerner. Simply through walking 4-7 miles a day, hunting wild game, harvesting honey, digging for tubers, picking berries, and fetching water and firewood.

We invented exercise for various reasons, but a significant reason many of us do it today is to burn excess calories and avoid becoming overweight and frail. The exercises adults design for this purpose are mostly stale, sterile, monotonous and unimaginative. And they usually take place in a designated, sanitised room with machines and clinical lighting. These rooms become churches of punitive ritual and atonement—places where cosmetic ends prevail over joyous means. Workout programmes often require a great deal of motivation and discipline—two things that are fleeting for many, as they find that maintaining these shame-fuelled, joyless routines is unsustainable.

A lot of us are led to think we're fragile unless we're demonstrating the proper specialised techniques. People can't even go to a gym and lift something without some macho meathead in a skimpy muscle tank-top and lifting gloves clutching a three-litre jug containing a BCAA, pre-workout and electrolyte concoction, coming over and mansplaining about correct form. With this mentality, it's easy to be deterred out of embarrassment, *gym-timidation*, or fear of harming themselves.

Then came the arbitrary exercise phenomenon known as *functional* exercise, where the only difference seems to ultimately be doing gym exercises that correspond better to *natural* human movement, rather than joint-isolating machine exercises and free-weight exercises. So now we have a new, distinct arm of the fitness industry, with a vague, ill-defined buzzword that helps us build more functional strength for our sedentary lives... But alas, it's just as miserable, aside from the sense of superiority that comes from virtue-signalling that they're doing exercise the "right way."

And, of course, this space produces many fear-mongering charlatans and grifters. There are overly-complex functional methodologies, which aren't a far cry from cults, such as *Functional Patterns*, *Weck Method* and *GOATA*, which, despite having no grounding in science, force the highest possible barrier to entry to movement by insisting that anything other than their dogmatic biomechanics principles is dysfunctional and assures injuries; thus

promoting the idea that exercise is nigh on impossible to get right. (It makes sense from a marketing perspective, right?) They are the self-professed guru-gatekeepers of fitness, selling the one true and safe way to move. One must pay through the nose for long-winded, overly complex, and specialised programs and certifications to be active and healthy, as if any kid running free around a playground or anyone who wants to play volleyball on weekends is doomed to a life of chronic injury if they fall out of line with the online gurus' biomechanical doctrine. Any personal trainer who subjects their client to 30 minutes of low-load "corrective exercise" or convoluted breathing drills to make their bodyweight squat or static posture look more visually appealing might satisfy the personal trainer and their Instagram account with before-and-after photos, but the client is still just as unhealthy and unenthusiastic about physical activity. Any personal trainer telling someone who's not meeting physical activity guidelines to focus on "quality over quantity" is negligent. We don't need to obfuscate exercise. In a society where much of the population is inactive and finds no joy in moving, we don't need more confusion, fear and risk aversion, which creates more barriers to movement.

Despite this, a bigger mistake in fitness and exercise culture is leveraging shame rather than play and enjoyment. We must drag ourselves to the gym because we don't align with conventional beauty standards, which are becoming increasingly ridiculous and unattainable. As I've mentioned, another growing trend is that we're increasingly focusing on objective measurements and results in our physical activity rather than on our subjective experience. Calorie intake and expenditure, *Strava*, *Fitbit*, and *Garmin* watches, HRV monitors, and how many kilos on a bar and on the scales all give us clear, tangible metrics for progress that we can use to compare ourselves to our other boring adult friends. We apparently need numerical data to feel good and determine where we measure on the imaginary hierarchical pecking order. We must keep up with the Joneses. All these things can act as great motivators. However, that motivation may begin to wane when the numbers plateau and consistent progress is unsustainable, and the Joneses plough on ahead. The numbers can be more important than the experience itself. Your Garmin watch doesn't tell you how much fun you had.

Fun, enjoyment, self-affirmation, empowerment through social connectedness and collaboration, and indeed any psychologically transformative experience from the exercise are immeasurable and therefore deemed irrelevant. Curiosity, enthusiasm, passion and the overall felt experience become unimportant factors when reaching numerical fitness goals.

For children and animals in the wild, play has no conscious purpose. They aren't thinking, "I need to play today in order to *insert dumb adult reason here*" They do it simply because it's enjoyable. Any health benefits gained or life skills learnt are merely a byproduct. To get more of the population moving in a sustainable way, there must be a radical reframing of physical activity that harnesses our natural drive to play.

The Birth of the Playground

One could argue that children throughout human history have basically always practised parkour when playing. Most children, when left to their own devices, often develop their own sort of parkour-esque movement. Of course, it's not intentional practice to become a better mover. Still, when a child plays, they undeniably expand their knowledge of what they can physically and mentally achieve and build on core social and psychological traits.

When we're young, we engage in play in a multitude of ways. A few are categorised as locomotor, creative, social, and deep play. Locomotor play is characterised by any movement for its own sake, in any direction. For example, playing tag, running, jumping, skipping and climbing trees. Creative play is essentially what it sounds like—using imagination to experiment, explore and create beyond the constraints of convention. Social play refers to interaction-based activities essential for developing social skills, communication, and cooperation in children. Deep play is defined by play that's risky, often significantly so. For example, climbing a tall tree, balancing on a high wall, jumping over a stream, riding a bike with no hands, playing 'chicken' or 'truth or dare'. Deep play is play with skin in the game.

Playgrounds can sometimes facilitate all four of these play types. As with exercise, playgrounds are relatively new. The first playground was supposedly built in 1859 in Manchester. It took them a long time to become more popular. I'm not sure how much of that was due to the sketchy, dangerous nature of the first handful of iterations. You can find old black-and-white photos from the early to mid-1900s of climbing frames over twenty feet tall, complete with two parallel poles for slides and ring swings.

After the Second World War, many playgrounds were built in the Brutalist architectural style. In built-up urban areas all around the world, playgrounds were built using unfinished concrete in the same style as the residential housing blocks surrounding them. Suddenly, random-looking mish-mashes of concrete, like London's famed Vauxhall maze spot, started appearing. London alone had about a dozen, as far as I'm aware. In the 60s, a housing estate in Sheffield called Park Hill had a playground that looked eerily similar to many of our parkour parks today, featuring concrete walls over head-height with gaps in the middle and plenty of bars jutting out from the concrete. The parks back then were tall, hard, sharp, and if there was no grass underneath to soften your fall, you would more likely be landing on unforgiving asphalt, concrete or gravel. They were colossal, ugly, risky and hazardous. They were… truly beautiful.

Today's playgrounds are all pretty low to the ground, built with a lot of plastic and ground made from that recycled rubber stuff or wood chips. They are now designed to safeguard children from as many risks and hazards as possible, thereby protecting them from making poor decisions. Thus also protecting them from the lessons they bring. (But, let's be honest, more likely protecting town councils from lawsuits.) As Nassim Taleb has said, "This is the tragedy of modernity: as with neurotically overprotective parents, those trying to help are often hurting us the most."

Parents who shield their children from risk and play are actually preparing them for failure. When children play, it may seem entirely trivial and frivolous, but they are discovering their limits and pushing beyond them, thus expanding their knowledge of the world and themselves. A playground has to have an element of risk to be exciting. As the gross half-man-half-amphibian Jordan Peterson says

in his book *12 Rules for Life* (where, funnily enough, he actually mentions parkour), "When playgrounds are made too safe, kids either stop playing in them or start playing in unintended ways. Kids need playgrounds dangerous enough to remain challenging."

No matter how much you pad the floor underneath the monkey bars, kids are still going to find ways to make things dangerous and hurt themselves. This is what kids do best. Through self-directed, unstructured, locomotor deep play, children learn that their actions have consequences. Their playground is very much a skin-in-the-game, high-feedback environment. If the council pads out the playgrounds and makes them overly safe, you can bet kids will find a loophole to make it dangerous and difficult. That, or they'll retreat to their screens.

The Death of the Playground

Another upsetting tragedy I've seen in recent years is the weird outdoor gyms being built in school playgrounds. You know the ones I mean—they have equipment that mimics gym machines (like the ones being abused in the first *Brooks* video). They usually feature a lat pull-down machine, a stationary bike, a leg press machine, and sometimes a makeshift treadmill that resembles the steel roller conveyor systems found in factories, complete with hand supports on the sides. (Which begs the question: why would anyone need a treadmill outside? You're outside! Just run!) There are sometimes machines I struggle to compare to any conventional gym equipment, such as the one where you put your feet into these open stirrups and swing your legs back and forth. And for some strange reason, a station with some steering wheels.

When these outdoor fitness areas started appearing in local parks, I could only guess they were intended for the elderly to maintain some modicum of physical fitness, as none of the stations seemed remotely challenging for anyone else. But recently, when I've noticed them appearing in schools, I can't help but think that society desperately misunderstands children and the fundamental value of play in their lives.

Most people will concede that there is an urgent need to get children off their screens and moving more regularly. The hilarious but worrying conclusion adults draw is that children need a gym like an outcome-fuelled adult to get them moving. Why would anyone think that children would adopt the same stale relationship with movement as boring adults? We have it backwards and are moving in the wrong direction entirely. These abominations will not satisfy the innate need for play and the intrinsically pleasurable, self-rewarding, boundary-pushing exploration it involves. I guarantee you won't see a kid using these parks for five minutes before they transform them into a climbing frame or something more challenging and obscure. Or worse, run back to their mum, dad, or teacher and demand their iPad back.

Adult-imposed values of fitness – which are usually motivated by numbers or feelings of shame – are the furthest thing possible from a child's mind. They are irrelevant to their fundamental value structure, which centres on enjoyment and curiosity. Just think—in their break and lunchtime at school, after their mind-numbing lessons, kids go out onto the playground and are given mind-numbing monodirectional exercise equipment where they are essentially expected to do more boring work. Children don't exercise—they play! To get them moving, you had better stealthily sneak the exercise into something playful and enjoyable. You will not rouse little Billie from their Fortnite-induced stupor with boring and easy gym equipment designed for the elderly.

Remember, when most other animals and we are young, we are hardwired to enjoy play. It's an in-built mechanism to make us practice being a fully grown animal whilst we still nuzzle on the bosom of dependence. To quote Rafe Kelley, founder of *Evolve Move Play*, "Play is one of our most powerful means of learning." It seems that as time goes on, we are increasingly suppressing this valuable learning mechanism, thus curtailing child development.

These outdoor gyms in schools are not the intervention we need to combat the withered, obese, socially inept and reclusive, uninspired, unmotivated and screen addicted youth of today. They don't offer an alternative more engaging than whatever keeps them glued to their screens. They are also not the intervention we need to

develop humans who are creative, resilient, resourceful, social and courageous.

The Base

What about adults? Is it too late for us? We, too, are fighting against the perils of modernity, and the next generations will no doubt be in a worse pickle than ourselves. Many adults are rarely in a position to see what they are made of. They seldom voluntarily stress test themselves with locomotor, creative, and deep play. In fact, the whole notion of adult play is widely considered strange and childish. Non-measurable exercise, sport or play without an obvious purpose requires some kind of elaborate justification to avoid embarrassment. Rarely do we see adults engage in a bout of unstructured free play. And when we do, children or dogs are usually involved. You can expect a full-grown man or woman climbing a tree in a park to receive some puzzled looks and maybe some unsavoury remarks. It is regarded as a frivolous opposite of the expected adult conduct, which you can assume surrounds work and responsibilities. Adults engaging in unstructured play in public risk embarrassing themselves for not abiding by the generally accepted norms of results-based exercise and the expected identity of a self-regulating, independently dependable, productive adult. But maybe all work and no play actually does make Jack a dull boy.

There is nothing to say that as soon as one reaches adulthood, they should stop learning and growing. We don't miraculously attain completion the moment we hit maturity. And, of course, we know this too. Otherwise, we wouldn't have self-help books lining our shelves. Growth is a life-long pursuit, and we'd be deluded, even narcissistic, to assume we were complete at any point in our lifetime. Your dysfunctional, trauma-laden and brain-broken parents are a testament to this. Not to mention your bitterly racist and homophobic grandparents.

People today seem to be aching for ways to reframe their perspective on themselves and the world. But the answer doesn't

solely lie in printed ink on pages. Although self-help books and trite Tumblr-esque quotes may help shift your perspective for a small time, they don't offer an experience that you participate in, which gives you an embodied, altered perception. What these self-help books don't provide is an environment from which you can learn and grow. To quote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, "The earth teaches us more about ourselves than all the books. Because it resists us. Man discovers himself when he measures himself against the obstacle."

It's essential to see our environment's capacity to be our best and most vital teacher. How we engage with our environment can form us in significant ways. With this in mind, we shouldn't mourn the death of the playground. The environment was our playground before playgrounds were invented—before exercise was invented. Now we have a tool to squeeze this playground for all its worth.

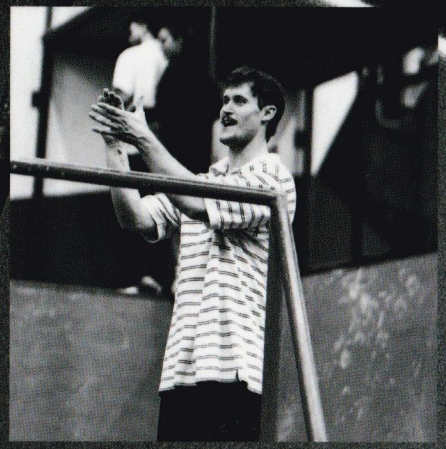
In sports science, parkour is increasingly recognised as a *donor sport*, meaning it's an activity so general that it donates physical qualities to other sports. Because it develops a broad range of athletic abilities required in team sports, such as coordination, balance, agility, changing direction, controlled soft landings across various planes, spatial awareness and strength of the entire body, it makes sense to be utilised as a foundational base to create more resilient athletes with a general skill set from a young age. Athletes who build a strong foundation in parkour are more likely to excel in other, more specialised sports.

I see parkour as far more than this. Its breadth is not only valuable as an athletic base for producing a handful of successful athletes. From my perspective, parkour can simply be defined as *play continued*—from the natural, joy-driven play of childhood, evolutionarily embedded in all of us and vital to our development, to our ongoing joy-driven development with parkour. It houses locomotive, creative, social and deep play. It's a practice that allows us to learn and grow together by using our bodies to interact with our environment in creative, physically and mentally demanding ways. It is so broad, all-encompassing, and entirely accessible, and it offers us great potential to develop a well-tuned, methodical internal problem-solving process for overcoming challenges and fear. It cultivates a

challenge-positive mindset, which increases willingness to dive into novel and challenging experiences, and builds an antifragile mind, body and spirit. It has the potential to offer uninterrupted insight into the mind, allowing us to witness how we process and react to fear, doubt and adversity, so we can orient ourselves toward the character traits we admire. It fosters deeper connections and social cohesion through collaborative effort, creating a profound sense of belonging and connectedness within a community and family. By overcoming fear and managing risk, we can increase confidence by fostering deeper, more grounded trust in our judgment and intuition. All these things lead me to believe that parkour is the most natural and solid foundational base, not just for success in other sports, but for building our ideal lives.

What is parkour? It's a thing so obvious and innate yet malleable and hard to pin down. Maybe, as Daniel Ilabaca says in the opening line of *Choose Not to Fall*, "It's nothing because it's everything."

Storror's Callum Powell presents a scathing deepdive into one of the most misunderstood newer sports and subcultures. Not only misunderstood by the public, but also by its own practitioners. WHAT IS PARKOUR? attempts to untangle its identity crisis by dissecting its culture, murky media history, and the existential crises afflicting many of its professionals. It's a book squarely aimed at the parkour practitioner to help them understand their confusing sport, build a better relationship with it, and rally the divided community together under the unifying goal of parkour advocacy.



bookvault
ISBN 978-1-8073-8584-2
£16.99
ISBN 978-1-8073-8584-2
9 781807 385842 >
Buy now: